

Seven Questions Jesus Asked

“What do you want me to do for you?”

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Mark 10:46-52; John 1:35-42

Introduction to the Series

Depending on how you count them, there are between *two and three hundred questions* asked by Jesus in the Gospels. Many of these are multiple occurrences, taking into account the four different writers, so the numbers are really less. Still, the number is impressive, as is the fact that Jesus seems only to answer directly *three* of them, by some accounts. As a rabbi, Jesus was expected to ask questions. Commonly, questions from students were met by questions from their rabbis. Answer a question with a question! It made for endless conversation, facet-turning, and fresh perspectives. The great issues of the day could hardly find singular answers. In fact, the orientation of Jewish education didn't deal so much in *answers* as in *persons who gave answers*. Jews have always known that God's ways are higher than ours, as are His thoughts (Isaiah 55:9). The biblical writers refused to settle for immediate solutions to thick questions, and so they persisted in asking them.

Perhaps the one question that falls off our radar (because it's not in the Gospels) comes in the book of *Acts* where Jesus appears to Saul of Tarsus:

⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do" (Acts 9:4-6).

The double address underscores the urgency of the question, forcing Saul to ask the identity of the voice he hears within the blinding light of the vision. There really is no *answer* that satisfies the question, nor does Jesus expect one. What he wants from Saul is a life-changing decision to obey the instructions he will soon receive. Invariably the questions of Jesus require *actions* not *answers*; *decisions* not *debate*.

When Jesus *asks*, he unnerves, realigns, transforms, and subverts all the old assumptions and loyalties. Perhaps we've come to think that Jesus is the man *with all the answers*. It's a bit like the bumper sticker I saw many years ago that read, "Jesus is the Answer, but what are the Questions?" To which we might well reply, Jesus is the Question also. What unsettled Jesus' original audiences that were usually populated with "experts" is that he challenged their claim to *have all the answers*. Like us, they struggled with the notion of *mystery* and the truth about the *sub-text* of the world and about the subterranean level of *meaning*. Jesus' questions are more like *invitations* to attend a banquet where every serving unlocks some new flavor of truth, and where nobody is in a hurry to leave.

Our intention for this new series is to accept the invitation of Jesus. Entering his world of Q&A is risky, yet rewarding; dangerous, yet delightful; puzzling, yet perfecting. We cannot sit at his table without opening our hearts: we can't taste the food with our minds alone. Rainer Maria Rilke, poet and novelist, once wrote: "Try to love the questions themselves. Live the questions now" (from *Letters to a Young Poet*). For us, the love of Jesus constrains us to be his followers, and if he wants to build our relationship together around the probing questions of the Gospels, we can do no less than open our hearts to his love, and follow his questions wherever they lead.

Contrary to how Jesus often is portrayed, he does not offer spiritual tips. He does not give us a neat list of ten ways we can be closer to God. He does not provide easy answers. Instead, he asks hard questions. He is not the ultimate Answer Man, but more like the Great Questioner. In that he is like the Zen master who asks questions to

take us beyond the obvious to something deeper. He is like Socrates, who taught the people simply by asking probing questions. He is like the prophets, who railed against the ruling authorities and sought justice by asking challenging questions (*Martin Copenhaver, Senior Minister of Wellesley Congregational Church*).

Douglas Estes, in his scholarly work *The Questions of Jesus in John* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), shows how far Western thought is from the Gospel in its valuing of questions. The writer identifies five main types of Jesus-questions: open, reflective, decisive, responsive, and coercive. In turn, these subdivide into seventeen further categories. Early in his book, Estes acknowledges, “Most readers of the gospels read them to see what Jesus will *say*, not to see what Jesus will *ask*” (*The Questions*, 2). There is a tendency to pull out the “most important statements of Jesus” taken out of context and divorced from the questions that engendered them. This is due in part to a Western bias against questions even though the intellectual roots of the West go deep into the Q&A methods of Socrates and Plato. Even the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus (280-207 BCE) wrote fourteen books on questions and the art of questioning!

Our interest in this study is not merely to see what the questions of Jesus are *saying*, but to see what they are *asking*. It’s tempting immediately to turn the questions into statements, as if we can’t stand the open-endedness of the questions! The power of Jesus’ questions appear in the *narrative* material (the stories) found in the Gospels. Place a question in the middle of a story and you break up monotony, add dimension, and persuade the audience. Just when the audience thinks it has Jesus figured out, he “raises” a question and all bets are off. Questions gives new life to a conversation.

Much like a grain of sand that irritates the tissue (mantle) of an oyster and produces a pearl, so are the questions of Jesus. Ironically the oyster reacts to the sand as an invader — a foreign substance — and so covers up the irritant with layers of the same material (*nacre*) that originally created its shell. The result: a pearl! Jesus knew that *his questions irritated his audience*, and yet his intention was not to put them off but to engage them by drawing out of them the most fundamental matter of their human selves. Truth that arises from his questions is the pearl of great price given us by Jesus. Unless the questions annoy, disorient, intrude, and subvert, they probably won’t accomplish much. The more irritating is the question, the more beautiful, like the pearl, is the resulting truth.

And so our series is rightly a study in the fine art of being *irritated by Jesus*! Once thrown off center, once disoriented, once left uncertain, we become vulnerable to the deeper truth Jesus brings to us. The process is neither easy nor pain-free. Questions — the kind Jesus proposes — leaves the world forever changed, with much of it in our rear-view mirrors. The questions of Jesus open up the future by telling us that the old answers will no longer do. A Jewish sage once wrote: “No one asks questions in Hell” (Sirach 41:4), and so the importance of asking them while we live. Doing so, matters, even if questions themselves perplexing. Again, Estes comments:

Questions are so foundational to life, language and being that, ironically, we cannot easily define them. We learn to use questions at the earliest stage of language development — the ability to ask and question is a part of what makes us undeniably human. The ability to use questions strikes at the core of our nature. ... To paraphrase the linguistics philosopher Sylvain Bromberger, “Any ignoramus can *ask* a question even when the smartest scholar cannot *say* what a question is” (*Questions*, 14).

In predictable philosophical fashion, the German thinker Heidegger once characterized “humanity” as that “being whose being it is to call its own being into question.” In our study, through the questions of Jesus, he calls us to *the continued courting of the life of a subject*, for through them we can *think about life other than it is*, so that we might live life differently, fully, and forever.

From the three hundred or so questions of Jesus identified in the New Testament, where does one begin? Our challenge is an embarrassment of queried riches. Our decision to chose *seven* is subjective, though not without purpose. Our hope is that by exposing readers to these texts where *Jesus calls us into question*, our lives might

thereby undergo a new orientation, even if a full answer to each question is lacking. So much the better, for it leaves yet more heavy lifting — with great reward — to our future selves. For certain, we will never run out of things to talk about, and so the church is enriched.

Where to start? One writer (John Dear, *The Questions of Jesus*, 2004) groups his choices into general topics, starting with a set of three under the heading, *Invitation*. I'm attracted to that arrangement, since two of the three were chosen by our leadership to launch this series. For good measure, I throw in Dear's third choice.

Introduction for this Week

So ... The story of the *public* Jesus begins with recruitment, and in the process the familiar call of disciples by the rabbi Jesus shows up in the earliest Gospel texts. We will start there, and watch Jesus issue his *invitation* — that's the unifying theme for this week — in the form of questions. The questions of Jesus invite, but not with a carnival show, casually handing out handbills or cheap gimmicks. He wants people to follow him — to hear his words and make decisions — while avoiding self-help slogans and spoon-fed instruction. Jesus is, after all, a really good Rabbi, fully aware of how the rabbi-disciple relationship worked. Disciples of a rabbi were called *talmidim* — “learners” — and scholarship gives us a number of insights into how this unique educational scheme worked. For our understanding we need to reach back in time and not use examples of current practice to color the practices of rabbis contemporary with Jesus.

After the Maccabean Revolt in the second century B.C., more than 100,000 Jews from Babylon returned to Israel now freed from the Greek Empire. Because Judea was largely occupied, these newcomers chose to settle in the land around the Sea of Galilee and the Jezreel valley. Commonly called the *Hasidim* — “the pious ones” — for their fervor to observe all of the Hebrew Scriptures — they differed from the Judean Jews who were much more urbane and ritualistic, primarily keeping *Torah* (*Genesis* through *Deuteronomy*) while observing the priesthood and Temple ceremonies.

The Hasidim probably invented the synagogue, the center of community life where they studied scripture, held weddings, heard debates, kept festivals, offered worship, and asked questions. Among the Hasidim, there were a number of teachers — Rabbis, who were responsible for teaching the people, who would have the entire Torah memorized by the age of 12. These rabbis were not religious leaders or the keepers of the synagogue. Rather, they were what their name implied — *respected teachers*. Some rabbis, said to have *s'mikah* (“authority”) gave new interpretations for living out Torah. They could not *change* Torah, but that they gave interpretations for viewing it so they might live and act correctly. Among these special rabbis before the time of Jesus, were Honi and Hillel (the grandfather of Paul's rabbi, Gamaliel), the most prominent. Scholars will often call them “sages.” Rabbis without *s'mikah* were simple Torah Teachers or, as the New Testament calls them, “teachers of Torah.”

S'mikah rabbis lived an itinerate lifestyle and took on followers — called *talmidim* (disciples) — who lived with them most of time, and who would eventually be sent out on their own. The rabbis had a *yoke* — their method of interpreting Scripture — in which they would order the commandments of Torah from greatest to least. The *talmidim* of a rabbi would be expected to live by that yoke and to memorize the key teachings of that rabbi. Living with their rabbi, these *talmidim* would also learn to live in the same manner — with their greatest desire to be to learn to follow God just like their rabbi. In all of this, the *talmidim* were also in complete submission to the authority of their rabbi.

Even the most casual reader of the Gospels will note the similarities between Jesus and the *s'mikah* rabbis. Jesus too had a yoke (Matthew 11:28-30; 22:36-40); he sent out his disciples on their own after learning from him (Matthew 10:5-25); they memorized his teaching and followed it (Matthew 7:24-29, Luke 6:46-49); and they lived with him so that they could follow his example (Matthew 10:1, 16:24-28). Jesus the master rabbi, free to interpret the Scriptures in new ways, chose that faithful tradition that leads off with questions. In the Jewish tradition, it is incumbent on every generation to find new meaning in its history. Meaning is the co-

product of the meeting of minds, and Jesus chose to partner with allies and foes alike through directed questions that he might uncover afresh with them *the meaning of God*.¹

The Invitation Question in Three Forms

Forms of the Question

What are you looking for? (John 1:38)

Why are you looking for me? (Luke 2:49)

What do you want me to do for you? (Mark 10:36, 51)

The Texts and Their Contexts

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples,³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.³⁸ When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "**What are you looking for?**" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?"³⁹ He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.⁴¹ He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed).⁴² He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter) (John 1:35-42).

And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival.⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it.⁴⁴ Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends.⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.⁴⁸ When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."⁴⁹ He said to them, "**Why were you searching for me?** Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them.⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor (Luke 2:42-52).

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."³⁶ And he said to them, "**What is it you want me to do for you?**"³⁷ And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"³⁹ They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

⁴⁶ They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"⁴⁸ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"⁴⁹ Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.⁵¹ Then Jesus said to him, "**What do you want me to do for you?**" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again."⁵² Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way (Mark 10:35-52).

“What Are You Looking For?”

John's Gospel places the call of certain disciples (his *talmidim*) early in the narrative, connecting these calls with the ministry of John the Baptizer. It is John who points Jesus out to his own disciples and declares him to

¹ Recently, Libby Hennik and Lewis Aron co-authored *Answering a Question with a Question: Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Jewish Thought* (Academic Studies Press, 2010).

be “the Lamb of God” (John 1:36). In his own way, John *invites* his own disciples to look at Jesus as their next step — a kind of “hand-off” or referral from one rabbi to another. Agreeing to this arrangement, “they followed Jesus” (1:37). A great deal is missing from the text that was no doubt understood by the first audience. The mere fact they were *following Jesus* put them at the critical moment of choice where their *prospective* rabbi would decide what he was going to do with them. Young Jewish men would do that sort of thing, presenting themselves as suitable candidates for the extended period of rabbi-talmidim instruction. Jesus picks up their intention, and that is what prompts his leading question: “What are you looking for?”

Consistent with the ancient practice, they address him with the title “Rabbi,” taking yet one more step toward a formal relationship; they literally imagine themselves already as his *talmidim* and proceed to ask “where are you staying.” *Notice how they answer his question with their question.* Their question holds the full weight of their future with Jesus. There’s considerable force in the word “staying,” since it implies the kind of long-term “yoke” we discussed above. The question was their way of saying, “Where you are, we want to be there also.” How excited they must have been not to get another question (!), but to hear Jesus say: “Come and see” — paramount to saying that he accepted them into his rabbinic yoke. This is further reinforced when the text tells us, “and they remained with him that day.” To *remain* and to *abide* (used elsewhere in John’s Gospel) underscores symbolically, the commitment they made to Jesus as their Rabbi, following his reception of them.

Having considered, then, the content of ancient discipleship practices, we turn to the deeper understanding of Jesus’ question. The word “looking” in the Greek is *zēteō* which has a range of meanings: to “seek, enquire, search, desire.” Its closest match in Hebrew is *dāraś* which has at least one use as a technical term for *interpreting* Torah, and has to do with *exploring* and *asking*. The practice of such method is known as *Midrash*. Jesus may well be saying with his question, “Are you ready to enter the world where we ask questions of the sacred text in search of meaning?” Coincidentally, the literary form for this approach to rabbinic interpretation is the *parable* — the most common teaching method used by Jesus and learned by his disciples. A double entendre might underlie Jesus’ question: he is asking a question about questions — about the method of questions — and whether the disciples are ready to commit their life to Torah study in this way under his direction as their Rabbi.

The question Jesus asked is *hope filled*. Already, the two men in question follow Jesus because they find a *future* in John’s words, “See, the Lamb of God.” His question lacks rejection, shows interest, draws them out, is willing to listen, and is kind. That is, Jesus asks them about their expectations, their hopes, and their dreams. Such things matter to Jesus. He’s not just *collecting* disciples; he’s filling lives with hope. To ask, “What are you looking for?” assumes that there is, indeed, *something to look for*.

Perhaps these prospective disciples had once been looking for money, power, fame, or control. What Jesus calls them to look for is *meaning* — the kind found under his yoke. By asking this question, Jesus moves toward changing their hearts that they might be filled with *holy desires* that *look* for love, goodness, truth, peace, happiness, justice, mercy, and joy. For the next three years, they will listen, observe, practice, and experience the objects of this new desire that are promised by the simple question, “What are you looking for?” Put simply, Jesus commences with them a new journey toward God.

These are the *first words* of Jesus in the Gospel of John, and they are in the form of a *question*. First words of a newly met person leave first impressions. The first impression left by Jesus is he is someone who asks questions. The other Gospels have their own set of first words (Matthew 3:15; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:18-19, 21). Since these first words are different in each Gospel, we are obviously not suggesting that they are absolutely Jesus’ first utterances, but that in each Gospel’s perspective as it narrates the story of Jesus, they are *first*. Perhaps we might say that by choosing these particular words, the writers are suggesting what Jesus was up to, what he was about, what his agenda might be. For John, “seeking Jesus” is an ongoing theme, and at the end of the Gospel Jesus after his resurrection asks a nearly identical question: “Whom are you seeking?”

(20:15). The back story for this question may well be something the prophet Malachi wrote at the end of the prophets:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and *the Lord whom you seek* will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts (Malachi 3:1).

A kind of tantalizing prospect arises from the prophet's words, namely, that Israel will one day seek the Lord, and he will suddenly appear to them as the "messenger of the covenant." Perhaps Jesus had this in mind when he posed the question.

"Why are you looking for me?" (Luke 2:49)

Our next, but related, question is taken from the familiar story of the boy Jesus in the Temple when he was left there by the mistake (really?) of his parents. He was only twelve, at his Bar-Mitzvah, engaging with men more than twice his age in classic rabbinic debate to test his skill. Contrast this *passion* for Jewish dialectic with the *anxiety* of his parents who had a huge question of their own: "Why have you treated us like this (2:48)?" Two worlds collide in these two questions. As parents we know why Mary and Joseph were looking for Jesus, and hearing him ask the reason seems ridiculous. Parents worry when children disappear, especially in these days when safety issues abound. At least his parents owned up to their natural anxiety: "We ... *anxiously* searching for you." The word translated "anxiously" is the Greek *odunaomai* that emphasizes the *pain* associated with an experience. They were literally *suffering* over their misplacing of Jesus, and it left them in huge distress, as we might expect. The root for this term is the word for "power" and in this case it's utter absence. Mary and Joseph felt "helpless, powerless" and at other people's mercy to find Jesus. Interestingly, in Luke 16:24 the same word appears in describing the agony of the rich man who went to *Hades*, thus suggesting torment of soul. That's how the parents of Jesus felt.

What Jesus' question does is identify the essence of their search for him. He wants to know the root of their search for him, whether born out of guilt or fear or anger or terror or torment. Or, whether they seek him because they truly want to *find him* — find him as his own person, unencumbered by all the expectations that usually surround children when their parents wonder about what kind of future their children will face. What's missing from their encounter when they finally "find" him in the Temple is that covert sense of pride felt by parents when they see their children doing really well at something. There's nothing written about the knowing glances between Mary and Joseph when they hear the profound responses Jesus gives to the rabbis' questions. Nothing about the content of the questions and Jesus' answers. Only anxiety — anxious searching that fears the worst and can scarcely accept the best when they finally find it.

But Jesus' parents weren't alone. The nation of Israel convulsed with anxiety in an age of anxiety, not unlike the one we live in. When Jesus speaks to his parents, he speaks to everyone. He knows there are different reasons for seeking him, and not all of them have to do with Theology 101. Our age knows also that something has gone missing from human life and that attempts to supply the loss have failed. Immersed in interesting dialog, Jesus breaks away from the rabbis in order to acknowledge his parents, as he will do for the next few years until he reaches thirty. His question to them and to us doesn't stand alone, for it is followed by a further clarifying inquiry: "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" Some variant readings translate this, "Didn't you know I had to be about my Father's business?" There is implied irony in the question(s), for obviously the parents want Jesus back in *their house* and doing *their business*. In point of fact, he would be back there, subject to them, as Luke will soon tell us in 2:51. Yet, that is not his long-term situation, and what the parents seek in him will eventually yield to his God-given calling.

People didn't always seek Jesus for the same consistent reasons. His parents needed to have their anxiety taken away, assured that their son was safe and doing what good sons were supposed to do. Soon, they would have reason to seek more from Jesus, but only as through a glass darkly. His words, actions, purposes would one day not coincide with theirs. Healthy children make their own way eventually, out from under the schedules of their

parents. Given roots, they take wings. Not a bad thing, really. Mary, who would see Jesus hanging on the cross one day — not what she expected — and his future would turn out to be anything but safe. Some seek Jesus so that they might control him or use him or fit him into the otherwise tidy fabric of their existence. So when Jesus puts the question out there, “Why are you looking for me?” all bets are off, and our true motives and intentions emerge from the depths of our hearts to face Jesus as he is, for the reasons that he gives, and according to the will of the Father who sent him.

For his disciples, the question would one day acquire as yet unspoken meanings. Jesus wanted people to seek him in order to receive his love, share his mission, and change the world thereby. For us, the question might remain unanswered in some respects, but fully addressed in others. We’d like to say that we seek Jesus because of his authenticity, compassion, humility, and self-giving love. After two millennia, the man Jesus continues to ask us the question as the crucified and risen One — Who is alive forevermore. In him we discover utter reliability and needed sanity. In him there converge all the contradictions of our lives which summon us in our brokenness and pain and call us to our neighbor in his brokenness and pain. This Jesus who asks “Why are you looking for me?” actually wants to know the answer *from us in precisely the place we find ourselves*, even if responding to him feels embarrassing, as perhaps it might have felt to Mary and Joseph in the Temple that day. “Is that any way to treat your father and me,” Mary might have asked. I suppose Jesus might have responded to their anxious inquiry with a sarcastic, “Really?” but in his patience and obedience he treated them fairly with an *inviting question* instead, and then proceeded to go home with them anyway. We have the assurance that Jesus’ sequel to his own question is to go home with us also.

“What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:35-52)

And so we come to the coordinating point of this week’s study — the core of these questions, namely, “*What is it that you want me to do for you?*” Hearing this question as a parent, immediately calls to mind countless conversations with my children whose words fit no semblance of rational discourse! They cried, whined, complained, screamed, as they voiced deep dissatisfaction with the way things were, and directed those bursts of anxiety to their mother or myself. Our initial response was to say (*yell?*), “What do you want from me?” We probably didn’t even say “...from me” and offered a simple, “What do you want?” uttered with at-wits-end desperation. Helping children give voice to their needs is an important parenting task, but it is seldom easy to script, given the volatile nature of their emotions. They’d rather emote than speak.

In the text chosen for this central question of Jesus, we gather together the other two questions and take them up into this one. “What are you looking for?” and “Why are you looking for me?” intersect in “What do you want me to do for you?” The general human longing to find *something* gives way to the discovery that we need to seek *Jesus*, but once we encounter him, we remain at a loss to know what he’s supposed to be doing for us. The fact is that we have opinions about what he *should* do for us, as the text will reveal. We imagine that our needs are already known, laid out carefully, lined up in a row like a meticulous checklist waiting for our pencils on the clipboard. Then, no sooner does Jesus ask, “What do you want me to do for you?” than we are mumbling in confusion, unsure if the list is complete or if we left something off that’s important or fear that Jesus might not like the list we’ve made. After all, it’s *Jesus* standing before us in the text, offering himself, putting himself *at our service*, and the limitless possibilities of what he *might do for us* are almost too much for us to absorb.

Mark, in his handling of the question, chooses to give us *two different stories* where Jesus puts *this same question to different audiences*.

1. In the first incident, James and John, nicknamed “the sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17) — we can only imagine why! — ask Jesus for a blank check, for a wildcard: “Jesus, give us *whatever* we ask” (10:35). They must have been paying close attention to Jesus’ invitation, “Ask and you shall receive ...” and decided to put the invitation to the test! Or, they were feeling especially confident about their present relationship with Jesus, and wanted to cash in on the benefits. Or they totally misunderstood the nature of the kingdom he was announcing, and simply wanted to get in on the ground floor of a new venture. It is in response to this statement — this request, this demand — that Jesus rejoins with his question,

“*What* do you want me to do for you?” Unwilling to allow their statement to mask specific demands, he asks for the *what* in place of their *whatever*. He knows *what* lies behind their request: *they want to be in control*, and they see Jesus as somebody that takes charge, casts out demons, heals the sick, and makes bold statements to his opponents. And they want what he’s got. They want to “sit” right next to him, leveraging the enormous power that he commands, perhaps even advising him on how to use it. Wouldn’t we all!

Looked at through their eyes, Jesus is heir apparent to the royal kingdom of Israel, and they want to be in his cabinet where all the important decisions will be made. They think he is in the power-dispensing business, and they don’t want to miss an opportunity for personal advancement. Pretty heady stuff, don’t you think? Here’s real Jewish *chutzpah*! Jesus takes their response in stride, and then proceeds to clarify their response to his question by refusing the right to assign them royal promotions, claiming that he has no authorization to hand them out (10:40). Once more, he asks a follow-up question (good rabbinic practice!), “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptize with?” (10:38). This question is cryptic and complicated for it requires metaphorical thinking — the skill of poets and prophets — and the two disciples are more likely concrete operational thinkers for whom words like “cup” and “baptism” probably sale right over their heads, as they avoid eye contact with their rabbi. And so they bale out of the dialog by claiming to know exactly what Jesus means by saying, “Oh, yes, lordy, yes!” when in fact they have absolutely no idea what he means, and probably only want to get past the qualifying questions Jesus asks. After all, they do want to *qualify* for the job they’ve requested. Rather than answer a question with a question, they flee to the safe haven of certitude and claim to know exactly what he’s trying to tell them.

But their fumbling attempts to stay with Jesus’ question ultimately elicit from him a sarcastic, “Oh, *you will* drink the cup and *you will* undergo the baptism — got that right,” with the unspoken thought, no doubt, “even if you have no idea what I’m talking about.”

Though it might appear that Jesus’ question was lost on the Two, it had a deeper effect in unsettling their preconceived notions of what being *with Jesus* really meant. Think about it. “Sit on the left and on the right” will one day become “Hang on the left and on the right” and will have nothing to do with thrones or glory or power conceived in a traditional sense, but with Jesus on the cross where two *brigands* will hang, “on the left and on the right.” Identifying with Jesus on the cross is really what “cup” and “baptism” are about, and his question back to them “Are you able ...” will only make sense when the Two find themselves in the heart of the battle where following Jesus and being with Jesus involve much more than the finery of the royal court. They will need to *undergo* this kind of *trial* in order to understand his words — his question. They will need to live in the shadow of the cross for themselves in order to answer Jesus’ bigger question: “What do you want me to do for you?”

The cross calls forth sobering ways to ask Jesus for things. Suddenly the Two will not be so confident about “whatever we ask,” when their most needful thing will be to remain faithful to Jesus under the fiery trial they will face because of him.

In his extended discussion with the disciples who are especially upset with James and John, Jesus reviews the way Empire deals with power, its primary commodity. He critiques the layered lines of authority from top to bottom where the operative word is “lord” and the primary values are “greatness” and “regard.” Forget that, Jesus tells them. Forget all this crazy talk about right and left and glory and power. Those are values that endear men to the Empire that fawns over its own like ducks in a row that cling to honors and reputation and achievement. We are not in *that* world, Jesus tells his followers. “We are not in the world where I give you whatever you want, because otherwise you are afraid you will never have enough. We are not in the scarcity business where my job is to hand out the goodies so you can feel secure in the things that you own. We are, instead, in the *servant* business, where giving

yourselves away for the neighborhood is far more valuable than acquiring safe possessions from me. We are in the *alternate* world where such servant-based neighborhoods replace power-based ones.”

Then to drive home the point and to refine the target of his original question, Jesus tells how he, the “Son of Man,” will serve others even *to the death*, handing himself over as “ransom” — payment — to set free those whose lives are in bondage to having whatever they ask for. Addressed to us, we might ask, “Do we know what we are to ask Jesus for?” To get that response, Mark gives us the second setting for this question.

2. Further down in Mark 10, we meet a man who knows his own needs intimately. He is simply “a blind beggar,” not an uncommon sight on Israel’s street corners or by the side of the road. There’s nothing mysterious about his situation, nor is he contemplating the meaning of life when he cries out: “Jesus, Son of David, have pity (mercy) on me.” What a stark contrast to the statement of James and John given above! In the simple words of Bartimaeus is the plea for mercy that leaves it up to Jesus to decide *what he needs*. “Look at me, Jesus, and see what I need, and in your mercy, decide how you will give it to me.” That’s a pretty different kind of address than “give us whatever we want.”

But the crowds are unhappy with the blind beggar. They are put off by his mantra for mercy, his repetitious request from the “Son of David.” Why is the blind beggar so irritating to the crowd? Why do they want to silence him? Why are his cries for mercy worthy of a “rebuke”? Mark doesn’t say, and we are left to wonder. But the Empire where they live was certainly not in the mercy business. Justice, yes! Mercy, no! We wonder why we are bothered by the cry of the single mother who can’t make her rent payment. We wonder why we are offended by the plea of an immigrant for proper identity, or the complaint of a child in need of good health care. Widows, orphans, immigrants — they were all people at risk in Jesus’ day, along with the chronically and permanently ill, the marginalized that didn’t have a proper safety net or adequate resources for life. And yet the social order becomes agitated when such persons decide to cry for mercy. The social order is about power — about right and left — not about mercy.

Not Jesus. He is short with the grumbling crowd: “Call him.” Here’s the first step of recovery for people who have difficulty with other people’s pain: get them involved; send them on the mission; put them in contact with the need. “Call him” requires real contact between the complainers and the blind beggar. “Touch him with your words of invitation. If you can’t *help* the beggar or if you *won’t* help him, then at least invite him to come to me.” According to 10:49, the response is immediate, and they do what Jesus asks, and even throw in a few “cheery” words, but not before getting their digs in: “On your feet!” Suddenly the irritated crowds are barking orders to the blind beggar as if he were a lazy man needing to man up. They didn’t hear that from Jesus.

Standing before Jesus, the man hears Jesus ask, “What do you want me to do for you?” Same question as before. Same essential words. Different audience. Different because the blind beggar Bartimaeus makes no appeal for entitlement or privilege; no request for an inside position with the company; no claim to be greater than his peers. He is simply the neighbor who has a need, and without pretense, he honestly reaches out for mercy, and so Jesus may ask him the question, as he does.

The statement, “Rabbi, I want to see,” is worthy of Jesus’ attention. Bartimaeus is not asking for a life-long annuity. He is not seeking an unjust ownership in the kingdom of God. *He simply wants to see*, and having his eyesight restored falls well within the boundaries of the kingdom which Jesus is bringing. Persons without adequate resources for life and well-being are the real seekers of the kingdom. They are the “poor, crushed in spirit”; they are: “those who mourn”; they are “those who hunger and thirsty for justice to be done”; they seekers after *shalom* — the restorative power of God for human life. What the man *wants* is what Jesus wants! Jesus is all about helping people see: see with their natural eyes; see with their spiritual eyes. The road to the man’s spiritual vision passes through his physical vision.

Jesus doesn't ask further. He doesn't have a follow-up question for the blind beggar Bartimaeus. What he has is the offer of life with the abundance of mercy and health. "Go! Your faith has healed you." By calling Jesus the "Son of David," Bartimaeus had acknowledged the covenant that bound *king* with people, and as a loyal subject of the kingdom that Jesus was bringing, the blind beggar showed genuine trust in his sovereign Lord, Jesus, and for this Jesus honors him and heals him. You will notice that Jesus doesn't waste time trying to determine the *cause of his blindness* or questioning the *nature of his poverty* or if there was a connection between blindness, poverty, and a host of other irrelevant issues. Blind beggars require healing, beggars need resources, and Jesus asks his question, not to probe, but to *invite faith*.

Jesus "came to serve" and the case of Bartimaeus revealed the nature of the God who stoops to serve, asking questions that invite and not judge. We come before God as beggars in need of vision, and Jesus is the merciful and faithful king with whom questions invite faith.

Concluding Thoughts

Not all questions want information. Not all questions make inquiry. Some questions merely clarify meaning or uncover reticence or invite response. How a question reaches the other person may well depend on the openness it finds there. Maybe the underlying genius of the question is *what will I find at the other end?* Not all questions have *right answers* or answers in the back of the book. Ultimately, the questions of Jesus are about meaning, and they *invite*, as this week's questions did, the respondent to explore more than ideas, but rather the hidden chambers of human hearts in order to address open needs of human lives.

God *invites* the world to Himself through the carefully crafted questions of Jesus. God poses the question of *Jesus* each time the questions are asked. Jesus is in the question and in the answer.

This week's study identified some texts where questions *invited response* in ways that went beyond the ordinary quest for certitude. And in the case of our central question — "What do you want me to do for you?" — the respondents offered surprisingly different answers, considering their previous relationship with Jesus. James and John looked like prime candidates for a brilliant answer, considering that they were, after all, apostles of Jesus, and yet they utterly missed the point of his mission more than half-way through the Gospel of Mark! Perhaps those of us who claim a familiarity with Jesus, as long-standing members of the church or as experts on the teachings of the Bible, might have flunked the test right along with James and John. After all, don't we have the answers pretty much in hand? Have we not accumulated a rich store of really good answers to just about any catechism question the Lord might throw our way? No? Well, then, where should we turn if James and John disappoint us with their bold responses?

Mark says we should turn to the blind beggar Bartimaeus and allow him to teach us how to answer Jesus' question. He comes to Jesus empty-handed, "without one plea." He comes to Jesus stripped of pride or privilege or entitlement, and he comes seeking none of those things. His need was painfully clear, even if the crowds shrank back from being reminded that there still were blind beggars in their midst. Maybe Jesus took a moment to see if James and John were paying attention when he put the question to Bartimaeus. Perhaps Jesus wanted to see if they "got it" then when the man in need plead only for mercy and the simple use of his eyes. Did Jesus look his disciples in the eye when he asked the same question of Bartimaeus? Did he want to say to them, "Do you see what I mean?"

What the question of Jesus drew out of the blind beggar was an act of simple trust. What does the question of Jesus draw out of us?

Glory to God! Amen.

Digger Deeper: *Seven Questions Jesus Asked: “What do you want me to do for you?”*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of this week’s study, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website at <http://www.c1naz.org>, click on *Resources*, click the tab *Series*, find and click on the series title, find and click on the date you want, and then click on the *Background Notes* link at the lower left. You can also pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. We often hear that “Jesus is the answer.” Comment on the idea that “Jesus is the question.” Why might that be important for us to include in our understanding of him? How many questions asked by Jesus can you recall from your reading of the Bible? Which ones seem most important to you?
2. What question did Jesus ask Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9:4-6? Why did he ask it? Did he expect an answer? Comment on this statement: “The questions of Jesus require actions more often than they require answers.”
3. Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote: “Try to love the questions themselves; live the questions now.” In what ways is that true for the questions asked by Jesus?
4. Three questions cluster around each other in this week’s study. Read the following texts in their contexts, and write down the three questions: John 1:38; Luke 2:49; Mark 10:36 and 51. How does the Mark text provide a “center” for the other two?
5. The first question belongs to the wider passage, John 1:35-42. What is the main theme of this passage, and how does the question fit into the theme? In what ways do we “look for” Jesus, while actually looking for other things instead? How does our search for other things lead us to Jesus? Discuss the seekers for Jesus in this text and why Jesus’ question is especially applicable to them.
6. What is the setting for this week’s second question found in the narrative of Luke 2:42-52? What is Jesus doing when his parents finally catch up with him? How does their question open the door for his question in 2:49a? In what sense is “why” an appropriate interrogative for Jesus to direct toward his parents? Do you find it unusual that a twelve year old boy is asking questions of adults in ancient Jewish society? Why not? Evaluate his follow up question in 2:49b, explaining his reason for asking it, as well as what it means. What is the benefit of answering questions with questions, especially when we are “looking for God”?
7. Our third question of Jesus is the central one for this week’s study. How does the question in Mark 10:36, 51 unify the other two? Paying attention to the two instances of this question in Mark 10:35-52, discuss the two distinct audiences that hear this question from Jesus.
8. What motivates James and John to make the statement found in Mark 10:35 and make their request in 10:37? How does Jesus’ question in 10:36 open up the main theme discussed in the verses which follow? What is that theme?
9. Why does Jesus ask his follow up question in 10:38, and what does he mean by asking it? Do you think the disciples’ response is sincere, or does it interrupt the flow of the conversation? How does Jesus press the point of his original question by discussing how the Empire handles the use of power (10:42)? How are Jesus’ expectations radically different (10:43-45)?
10. Compare the second story in 10:46-52 with the first one. Note the main differences, even though Jesus’ asks the same question in 10:51? Contrast the blind beggar Bartimaeus with James and John. How is his response to Jesus completely different? What request does he make of Jesus?
11. Discuss the crowd’s reaction to Bartimaeus when he cries for mercy. Why would the crowd behave this way? What does Jesus say to the crowd? How do they respond?
12. Explain the placement of Jesus’ question in 10:51 relative to the rest of the story. What about Jesus’ response reveals his attitude toward the man’s plea? How does Jesus affirm Bartimaeus and grant his request?
13. In what sense are the answers to the questions of Jesus, as illustrated in this week’s study, not found *in the back of the book*? Comment on this statement: “God gives us answers through the questions of Jesus.”
14. What the question of Jesus drew out of the blind beggar was an act of simple trust. What does the question of Jesus draw out of us?