

## The Day of Questions

Sterling UMC  
March 15, 2009  
Matthew 22:15-45

Isidor Isaac Rabi, a Nobel Prize winner in Physics, and one of the developers of the atomic bomb, was once asked how he became a scientist. Rabi replied that every day after school his mother would talk to him about his school day. She wasn't so much interested in what he had learned that day, but how he conducted himself in his studies. She always inquired, "Did you ask a good question today?"

"Asking good questions," Rabi said, "made me become a scientist."

In order to ask a good question I think you need to have noble motives behind the question. You have to want to know the truth. This morning we are going to talk about questions.

We are in the middle of a series of messages leading up to Easter. We are exploring Jesus' last week. These seven days changed the world. Understanding them can change your life as well.

On Sunday, the crowds cheered Jesus like a king. But Jesus knew the cheers of Sunday would soon give way to jeers and so Sunday the day of triumph became Monday the day of emotion. Jesus wept over Jerusalem because he knew what was going to happen to them. Then his tears turn to fire. He curses a barren fig tree and drives the money-changers from the temple. The events of Sunday and Monday were not lost on Jesus' rivals. Mark's gospel records that after the temple affair, "The chief priests and the teachers of the law... began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching". So Tuesday turns into a day of questions; a day in which the Pharisees attempt to challenge Jesus in order to trap, trick, or trip Jesus with a series of questions.

Let's look at each of these questions and Jesus' response and the lesson we learn from each.

The first question is a trap question.

At some time every older sibling has pulled this on a little brother or sister who had a nickel they wanted.

"Okay," older child offers, "let's flip for it. Heads I win, tails you lose."

The little kid agrees: "Sure!" Then when heads appears the older proclaims "Heads, I win!" Of course if tails comes up the declaration is "Tails, you lose."

At this point it suddenly dawns on the younger child that this is truly a no-win situation.

Whatever way the coin lands it's going to land in their sibling's pocket.

In this week's gospel text the Pharisees think they've concocted the perfect no-win question to entrap Jesus and put him in their pocket: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" The trap is admirably well laid. For if Jesus says yes, he'll alienate all those who continued to struggle against Roman rule and who ardently believed Israel must only be obedient to God and God's law. If, however, Jesus answers no, then he's immediately at odds with the entire Roman Empire and has identified himself as a dangerous, seditious opponent. Rome would deal swiftly with such a threat.

Jesus rejects the simple either/or. "Show me the coin of the realm," he says. The coin they show him bears the image and likeness of the reigning emperor, and this inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, the Majestic Son of God, and High Priest." Jesus calls attention to this image and inscription before he gives his answer: "The coins you carry belong to Caesar: they bear his image and inscription. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

You see basically this is a question of loyalty. To whom do you belong? Where is your allegiance? The lesson Jesus is trying to teach here has so much more to do than whether we pay the IRS on April 15<sup>th</sup>. Jesus' point is that we belong to God. We are "in this world, but not of this world."

You see when you commit yourself to Christ, when you claim Him as your Lord your whole life and being belongs to God. You bear God's image, just as the coin of the realm bore Caesar's image. And God's inscription is upon you

Many of you may remember the beautiful service we had here on Ash Wednesday and coming to the altar and receiving the imposition of ashes. You were marked with the sign of the cross on your forehead. I will never forget that image of looking out over this congregation and seeing each of you sitting there with a black cross on your forehead – a visible reminder of who we are and whose we are.

You are also marked as a member of God's family through your baptism. Whether as an infant, a child, or an adult, the waters of baptism symbolize your identity as a child of God. You bear God's image and inscription just as the coin of the realm bears Caesar's image and inscription. And thus you should see all of your life, your time, talents and possessions as instruments for the accomplishment of his just and loving will. His image is stamped upon us as His children, and we have a moral obligation to submit ourselves to Him as our ultimate authority.

The second question on this day of questions was a trip question, a question designed to trip up Jesus and again force him to say something which they could use against him.

This question came from a group known as the Sadducees. This was a group who were theologically oriented, but they did not believe in the resurrection. They said when you're dead, you're dead, so don't worry about it. They were very logical, and said since

there's no proof, they won't believe it, and if the Bible isn't logical in some point, they will always choose logic over the Bible.

Their question had to do not with this world but with the other world. They told about a much married woman who had had seven husbands; all of them died, and then she died. They asked Jesus whose wife she would be in the resurrection. It was about as relevant as some of the other questions concerning theology which have been asked! "How many angels can dance on the head of a needle?" "How much water does it take for baptism to be effective?"

Jesus took this trivial trip question and turned the question back to the root of the matter. "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living," He said. Jesus basically said to this man, "Why are you so concerned about that which is not relevant and that which is not understandable?" "Why are you so concerned about the hereafter when your real problem is the here and now?"

You see this is basically a question of faith? What do you believe? Where do you place your trust? In that which you can see or in that which is unseen? To expect all the "I's" to be dotted and "t's" to be crossed before one can believe is to place a prerequisite for belief upon man which Jesus never did. There are some questions to which answers are simply not possible. That's where faith comes in.

The third question on this day of questions was a trick question.

The Pharisees come to Jesus once again with a question designed to do damage to the reputation of Jesus. And once again Jesus proves he is equal to the task. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

The Jewish rabbis of Jesus' time had meticulously gone through the first five books of the Bible and identified 613 individual statutes in the law. Then they took these hundreds of commands and attempted to identify which were great commands and which were little commands. Now you can well imagine that there was no end of debate on which belonged where. And these lawyers who come to Jesus are attempting to draw him into the debate. "Which is the greatest?" They ask.

Jesus went back to the rich reserve of knowledge he had concerning what we call the Old Testament, and he called forth two great statements – "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with you're your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Over these 613 statutes of the Law stand these two obligations in our relationship with the Lord: Love God and love your neighbor.

You see this was a question of obedience. Are we going to follow God's will? Are we going to submit to his authority in our lives? Or are we going to pick and choose those things we want to follow and those things we want to ignore? Jesus is saying that our

religion is not a matter of keeping the law. It is not law, it is love. Love is the answer to all of the questions.

There is a wonderful story from early America about the life of Rufus Jones. He was a Quaker and one of the movement's greatest thinkers. In his autobiography he relates a childhood incident that seems trivial in itself, but, seen in the light of what he eventually became, it was probably the turning point in his life that made him the great man he was. One day his parents told him to stay home and weed the turnip patch while they were gone. He had just begun when some friends came along and persuaded him to go fishing with them, promising to help him weed the garden when they got back. But, as every fisherman knows, it's practically impossible to keep track of the time when your fishing--especially if the fish are biting!

When Rufus returned home after dark, his mother was waiting for him. Silently, she led him to his room. He knew what he deserved, so he offered no excuses. He knew his mother would throw the book at him. "But then," he writes, "a miracle happened instead. Mother put me in a chair, knelt down, put her hands on me, and told God all about me. She interpreted her dream of what my life was to be. She portrayed the boy and the man of her hopes. She told God what she always expected me to be, and then how I had disappointed her hope. 'O God!' she prayed. 'take this boy of mine and make him the boy and man he is divinely designed to be.'" Then she bent over, kissed him and went out and left him alone in the silence with God.

Now that's creative love! You see law is not enough. Law tells us what we have done wrong. Love tells us who we can be.

This brings us to the forth question of this day of questions. It isn't a trap question or a trip question or a trick question. It is the truth question. Jesus had spent much of this day responding to and answering the questions of the crowd. So Jesus turns the tables on them and he asks the final question, "What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?" This was his way of saying, "Your questions tend to deal with your relationship to man, but what about your relationship with God?"

This is the ultimate question. Why? Because the way that we respond to this question determines the answer to all the other questions.

A preacher was trying to put the finishing touches on his sermon and the hour was late on Saturday. His little six-year-old daughter kept coming into his study and disturbing his train of thought. Of course, he loved his daughter and wanted time for her, but just now he needed time apart to finish his sermon. Wanting to be as fatherly as possible and yet be alone, he seized upon the idea of cutting up a map of the world like a jigsaw puzzle, feeling that it would take the little girl a long time to put all the little countries in their proper places and the map together again. He spread out the parts of the global puzzle on a table and set her to work on it. He then went back to his work, feeling that he would have a long, unbroken period for study. However, in a short time the daughter

was back, saying the map was completed. "How did you get it together so quickly?" the father asked.

"You see, daddy," she said, "I discovered that there was a picture of a man on the back of the map, and when I got the man right, the rest of the world came out right."

This is what Jesus was trying to say to those who questioned him that day. He was saying that all the troublesome questions of life fall into place when a person brings themselves into proper relationship with God.

"Jesus asked." That's the title of a wonderful book by London biblical scholar Conrad Gempf in which he makes the case that if Jesus were alive today, and you were to encounter him on the street, he would be more likely to ask you something than to tell you anything.

So what questions would Jesus ask? He would ask you the loyalty question. To whom do you belong? Where is your allegiance? He would ask the faith question. Do you believe? Where do you place your trust? In that which you can see or in that which is unseen? He would ask the obedience question. Are you going to follow God's will? Are we going to submit to his authority in your life? Are you going to follow His law of love? But most of all he would ask the truth question. Let me ask you that question: What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he? Is he your Savior? Is He your Master? Is He your Lord? These are the questions. The question is, how do you respond?