

TRICK QUESTIONS

Matthew 22:34-46

³⁴Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:

³⁶“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

³⁷Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

⁴¹While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, ⁴²“What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?”

“The son of David,” they replied.

⁴³He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says,

⁴⁴“ ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.” ’

⁴⁵If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” ⁴⁶No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions. [TNIV]

Let’s start with a few trick questions:

1. A 3 metre rope ladder hangs over the side of a boat with the bottom rung on the surface of the water. The rungs are 30cms apart, and the tide goes up at the rate of 15cms per hour. How long will it be until three rungs are covered?
2. A farmer had 15 sheep, and all but 8 died. How many are left?
3. A man dressed all in black is walking down a country lane. Suddenly, a large black car without any lights on comes around the corner and screeches to a halt. How did the car driver know he was there?
4. A rooster laid an egg on top of the barn roof. Which way did it roll?
5. Before Mount Everest was discovered, what was the highest mountain in the world?
6. How many animals did Moses take onto the ark?
7. How many birthdays does the average person have?
8. If a plane crashes on the border between the Qld and NSW, where do they bury the survivors: Qld or NSW?
9. If you divide 30 by half and add ten. What do you get: 25, 45, 50 or 70?

10. If you had only one match, and entered a dark room containing an oil lamp, a candle, or some newspaper, which would you light first?
11. Is it legal for a man to marry his widow's sister?
12. Larry's father has five sons named Ten, Twenty, Thirty, Forty...Guess what would be the name of the fifth?

Jesus was asked a 'trick question'.

But it wasn't trivial like these 12 questions.

The Pharisees lined up their top expert in Old Testament Law in the hope that Jesus would answer wrongly. And if he answered wrongly, then that would discredit Jesus altogether, for it would prove that he was a false prophet. And the Old Testament Law was very clear on what should happen to false prophets: *⁵That prophet or dreamer must be put to death for inciting rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. That prophet or dreamer tried to turn you from the way the LORD your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you.* [Deuteronomy 13:5, TNIV]

It was a very nasty game being played here. A life or death game!

And to see clearly how nasty we need to take note of where and when this scene is happening.

It is the last week of Jesus' life on earth. Palm Sunday had just occurred. Jesus was back in the temple courtyard talking to the crowds of people who were there for the Festival of Passover. One after another, the Jewish authorities tried to discredit Jesus:

21:23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"

22:17 "Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

22:23,28 That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. ... "Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?"

And now this last question:

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³⁶"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Again, we need to be aware that there was a crowd listening in, and not just the people in the temple court at that time; but also people down through the centuries.

The first to ask the question: "Should I believe Jesus of Nazareth, or not?" were the first people to hear the Gospel as the Apostles went out from Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection; and these first hearers were

mostly Jewish people. “Is Jesus a true prophet? Does he speak God’s Word, or some lie?”

So this little scene has been recorded for us, because it is of pivotal importance for the message of the Gospel.

Jesus was asked a seemingly simple question: “Teacher, which is a great commandment in the Torah?” For in the Pharisees tradition, there were commandments which were foundational for all the rest of the Torah. So some commandments were greater than others.

How does Jesus answer?

He answers by quoting the Old Testament Law, and by posing a question from the Old Testament.

First he quotes Deuteronomy 6:5: *Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength* [TNIV]. And alongside it he puts Leviticus 19:18: *Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.* [TNIV] From these two commandments, Jesus teaches, all other commandments are derived.

And I like the way one writer reflects on it. Lewis L. Austin, in [This I Believe](#), wrote:

Our maker gave us two hands. One to hold onto him and one to reach out to his people. If our hands are full of struggling to get possessions, we can't hang onto God or to others very well. If, however, we hold onto God, who gave us our lives, then his love can flow through us and out to our neighbor.

No one need argue with Jesus’ answer. At least, I’m not.

And yet, in some of the Jewish traditions, the command to love one’s neighbour raised the question of who is one’s neighbour. In the context of Leviticus, the neighbour is one’s fellow Israelite. Jesus would redefine this in terms of who one needs to be a good neighbour to (Parable of the Good Samaritan), because the rule of love always demands a rethinking of our relationship to other people.

But Jesus doesn’t seem to pursue this thought. He seems to change the subject. Jesus throws a question back at his questioners. Using a passage from the Old Testament, Psalm 110:1, he asks: ⁴⁵*If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?”*

There are a couple of things going on here, and we need to keep in mind the context: it is passion week. Christ is heading to the cross.

So the first thought is that Jesus has silenced his critics. ⁴⁶*No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.* Which means that at the end of the week, when Jesus was put on trial, the Jewish authorities would have to use underhanded deceitfulness, false witnesses etc.

Second, Jesus is saying something about who he is: He is not just Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary and Joseph; but also the Messiah, the Son of David, and ultimately the Son of God, for he is David's Lord! But this understanding would only become clear after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension to God's right hand.

And finally, we are given here an insight into what Jesus' death was about. And this brings us back to theme of love, for God is our Good Neighbour. It is about God the Father who shows us what real love is like, for he did not spare his own Son, but sent him into the world as the Messiah who would suffer and die for all the world.

What, then, is the greatest commandment, to go back to where we started? The greatest commandment is to believe in Jesus Christ.

²⁸*Then the crowds asked Jesus, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"*

²⁹*Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." [John 6:28-29, TNIV]*

I have spent a good part of this sermon talking about the Bible text. Now we need to ask the question: How is this important for me?

The truth is that the Church, the Body of Christ, is always in a way in Passion Week, with the cross always casting a shadow of puzzlement and offense. For we are always facing the question, whether from within own hearts or from people outside the Church: Who is this Jesus? Is he 'for real'?

Well, we need to be aware that every generation of Christians has been challenged with the question: "Why should I believe what you proclaim?" To put the question very simply: *Is Christ true?*

Our task is not so much to argue with people as to give the answer Christ Jesus gave: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life* [John 3:16, TNIV].

And then, when Christians face rejection and even persecution for this message that Jesus is Lord, St Paul gives us this encouragement:

³¹*What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who then can condemn? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. [Romans 8:31-34, TNIV]*

Amen.