

A Series of Questions (22:15-46)

Good to see you all this morning. If you have a bible, turn with me to the book of **Matthew, chapter 22**. And while you're getting there, I want you to imagine with me a **not-so-hypothetical situation**. You're building a friendship with someone in your life: a coworker, a neighbor, a classmate—someone you know. And things are going relatively well...but *then*, they find out that you are, in fact, a Christian. And it seems like as soon as they find that out, the *nature* of the friendship *changes*. And not for the better. They become a little more stand-offish, a little colder, maybe even a bit *aggressive* towards you as a result. Now, maybe that's because they *aren't* a Christian, and they're a little suspicious of Christians. Or *maybe* it changes because they *are* a Christian, but because they suspect that you're not the same "*kind*" of Christian as they are. But one way or another, the relationship changes.

And all of a sudden, they **start asking you questions** that are at least loosely related to you being a Christian. **Questions about what Christians believe about x or y. Questions about why Christians do or don't do certain things. Questions about what you think about something that just happened somewhere in the country that was all over the news.** And the more questions they ask, the more you get the distinct impression that these aren't really *questions* at all. They're *tests*. They're not asking because they're genuinely *curious* about your answer, and want to *learn* from you. They're asking because you're being *evaluated*. Because they are trying to determine just how immediately they want to discontinue this friendship they have had with you.

Anybody *been* in that type of scenario? And if not, can you at least *imagine* it happening? **If so, you are primed and ready** for the passage we're about to read, and the questions *Jesus* is asked *in* it. Today, we are going to at least *attempt* to cover **thirty two verses of Matthew** (I didn't have the Scripture reader read all thirty two of them because that felt cruel). But we are going to *attempt* to cover verses 15 all the way through 46. **Now, part of the reason I say we're going to "attempt" that is because some of you have heard me teach before; you know sometimes it's a challenge for me to cover two verses in one teaching.** So you're appropriately skeptical. But I'm feeling optimistic.

And here's **why I wanted to cover all that** ground at once. **In this passage, three different groups of people ask Jesus three different questions, and then Jesus asks them one in return. And on the surface, it may feel like these are different interactions, about very different topics. But there's actually one common dynamic going on in all of them. Behind each interaction there is a common posture towards Jesus. These questions aren't just questions, in other words; they're tests.** They're attempts to

nail down exactly who Jesus is and what he believes so that they can justify dismissing him.

If you've been following along in Matthew with us, you'll recall that **at least a few of these groups** had **already decided to destroy Jesus** (i.e. have him *killed*). And the *rest* had at least decided they weren't going to *listen* to him. So **having already decided to reject him, these groups are now at the stage where they are trying to justify that rejection**. They now want to find reasons to believe that dismissing Jesus was the *right* decision for them to make. And *that* is underneath all of the questions they're about to ask.

And **that's also where** I think this passage as a whole has **lots to teach us**. Because a lot of people today *also* have questions about Jesus. Some of *us* here this *morning* have questions about Jesus. And *sometimes*, they're just that: *honest* questions. But sometimes too, they are *more* than that. **Sometimes, our questions are actually conscious or unconscious attempts to reject Jesus and his authority over our lives. And then, attempts to feel justified in that rejection.** Just like the groups of people in the story.

So here's **the way I want to approach the passage** this morning. I'm going to teach it in *sections*. In each *section*, I give you a *name* for that particular type of *question* people often ask. I'll then show you where I *got it* from in the passage. And then we'll *talk* about how that question shows up in people's lives today. Make sense? If it doesn't yet, I think you'll catch on quick as we go along. Okay, first, let's talk about what I would call...

The Political Question (v. 15-22)

Here's what this one sounds like: **does Jesus affirm or challenge my political perspective?** This one will be **fun**—people love talking about this stuff in church. Let's read the interaction and I'll show you where I'm getting that from. Start with me in v. 15:

15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. 16 They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Nothing like a little empty flattery towards the person you secretly *hate*. *You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are.* **17 Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" 18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, "Whose image is**

this (on the coin)? *And whose inscription?*” 21 “**Caesar’s**,” they replied. Then he said to them, “So give back to **Caesar what is Caesar’s**, and to **God what is God’s**.” 22 When they heard this, they were **amazed**. So they left him and went away.

Okay. The *Pharisees* and the *Herodians* were **rival religious groups** in Jesus’ day. **But they often functioned much like rival political groups**. They didn’t much *like* each other, because they had distinctly different *visions* of the world, and **particularly, of how the Jewish people should relate to the nation of Rome**. The *Pharisees* thought that the Romans any amount of *friendship or cooperation* with Rome was a one-way road to worldliness. The *Herodians* played *nice* with Rome, because they figured that meant more power for *them* as a result. Their approach to Rome was essentially “go along to get along.” So functionally, **there was a deep, substantial rift between these two groups**.

But *here*, **both groups approach Jesus** with a question: **should we pay the imperial tax to Caesar (the Roman emperor) or not pay it?** The *Pharisees* believed you *shouldn’t* pay the tax, because that was in essence to *compromise*. The *Herodians* had no problem with it because it was *practical* and *expedient* for them to pay it. So this is a *politically charged* question for *these two groups* to ask Jesus. **It would be sort of like a group of conservatives and a group of progressives coming up to you today and asking, “so what are your thoughts on gun control?” and then watching you sweat it out. They essentially want to know what camp Jesus is in. And whatever camp he’s in, the other camp will feel justified in writing him off.** Make sense?

So **how does Jesus answer?** Well, with an *object* lesson. He asks for someone to show him the coin used to pay the tax. Then he asks whose *picture* is on the coin, to which the answer is “Caesar.” (They had *emperors* on their coins much like we have *presidents* on ours.) Okay, he says. *You should give to Caesar what is Caesar’s* (a direct *challenge* to the *Pharisees*, who believed you *shouldn’t* pay the tax). So, if you stop *there*, it might *seem* like Jesus sides with the *Herodians*. But you’ve got to keep reading. He follows *that* up with, “...and give to God what is God’s.”

So let’s see if we can **follow Jesus’ logic**. The *coin* had **Caesar’s image on it; what has God’s image on it?** What does the bible say is made in the image of *God*? Or more specifically, *who* is? *Us*, right? *Human beings*. So Jesus is saying, “give Caesar’s money to him if he asks for it. He can have it. But give *God* what *he* asks for. Namely, your entire self.” Here’s why that was significant. **The *Herodians* were notorious for not just going along with the Romans, but actually living like the Romans. They partied like the**

Romans, were driven by *greed and brutality* like the Romans, even indulged in *sexual sin* like the Romans.

So **while Jesus may seem at first like** he's siding with *them* on whether or not to pay the tax, he's actually taking aim at *them* as well. He's saying that there's a better question than "what should I do with my money?" And it's "what should I do with my *life*?" He's telling the *Herodians* that just because they give their *money* to the Romans, doesn't mean they should adopt the Roman way of life. So **in all likelihood, with his answer, Jesus probably left both groups** in front of him feeling a little bit affirmed, and a little bit frustrated. They *both* came to Jesus wanting him to *validate* their political perspective. Or, wanting him to *oppose* it so they could feel *justified* in their opposition to *him*. And instead, Jesus just challenged and confronted them both.

Okay. I **don't think I need to prove this** to *anybody* living in 21st century America, but **political allegiances can run deep in people's hearts and minds**. ~~Sheeker, I know.~~ And *often*, that means we will come to Jesus expecting him to *validate* and *affirm* our political perspectives, rather than allowing him to *challenge* them. **And if you don't believe me on that, go to Google once you leave today and just type in the words, "a biblical defense of _____" and put whatever political issue in that blank that you want to. Gun rights. Gun control. Pro-life. Pro-choice. Immigration. Anti-immigration.**

I can just about guarantee you that if it is a well-known political issue, you can find someone on the internet telling you that Jesus agrees with whatever perspective *you* hold on that particular issue. **And to be honest, there probably is more merit to some** of those arguments than there is to others, which is a conversation for a different day. But my *point* is that *when we* approach Jesus that way, we are doing precisely what the Pharisees and the Herodians did in this story. **We are coming to Jesus with our minds already made up, and expecting him to agree with us on whatever issues we are passionate about already. Or bare minimum, that expecting that he not challenge what we believe about those issues.**

I am **personally so caught off guard** at how often I hear Christians describe other Christians and/or churches as "too conservative" or "too liberal," politically speaking. What's even *more* concerning is that I hear those critiques *far* more often than I hear terms like "biblical" and "unbiblical." I think that's a *testament* to how thoroughly we've been disciplined by *politics*. To the point that **we now evaluate our faith through the lens of politics, rather than politics through the lens of our faith.**

But **if Jesus' response** in this passage is **any indication:** when we approach Jesus expecting him to affirm our political perspective, he's at least *likely* to *affirm* some

things about our position, and directly *challenge* other things. **Jesus does not fall neatly within Republican or Democrat lines, just like he didn't fall neatly within Pharisee or Herodian lines back in the day. He has his own kingdom—which means he is not bound by loyalty to anyone else's kingdom.** And here's why that's important for us to know: **if Jesus has to fit *within* our political framework in order for us to obey him, that actually reveals that our loyalty is to an earthly kingdom, and not to God's.**

When you are truly following Jesus in every arena of life, he's going to lead you to think some things that *Republicans* don't like, and some things that *Democrats* don't like. And some things that *neither* of them like. Welcome to the strange, wonderful world of following Jesus. ...And *that* was just the *first* section of this sermon 😊. Y'all ready to keep going? Okay, second interaction Jesus has, we might call...

The Absurdity Question (v. 23-33)

Here's how I'd language *this* one: **will Jesus require me to believe anything fanciful or superstitious?** Take a look with me, starting in v. 23 of our passage:

23 That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection (that's a very important detail: **the Sadducees, who say there *is* no resurrection...**), **came to him** (that is, Jesus) **with a question. 24 "Teacher," they said, "Moses told us** (in the Old Testament law) **that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for him. 25 Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. 26 The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. 27 Finally, the woman died. 28 Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?" 29 Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. 30 At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. 31 But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, 32 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."** 33 **When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.**

Okay, there was a lot in there. Let's see if we can dissect it a little and show you what's at the *heart* of it. The Sadducees reference an **Old Testament command**, found in the book of Deuteronomy. In that passage, if a man *died* and left behind a wife with no kids,

his *brother* was required to marry his widow.¹ Now, I'm fully aware of how terribly uncomfortable that practice probably makes most of us. Back in the day, it was actually a really *beautiful* practice put into place for the protection and provision of women.

But really, that's **not even the point** of this passage. The point is that **the Sadducees are asking Jesus about a *practical implication of the resurrection***. But think back to a second ago: do they *believe in the resurrection*? *Nope*. They thought the concept was a little silly. The idea of dead people coming back to life, life after death, angels, demons—anything along those lines was *rejected* by the Sadducees. All of that felt a bit *absurd* to them. So, question: **why would the Sadducees be asking Jesus about a very specific implication of something they don't believe?** Because it's not a *genuine* question, but a subtle way of mocking the idea of the resurrection. They're essentially saying, "come on, Jesus. Don't you see what kind of silly situation the resurrection of the dead would create, if it were real?"

Now, **all of that is similar** to a posture some people hold **today**. The posture is "I *would* be interested in Jesus, but it all just feels a bit too superstitious." "I **just don't buy the stuff about miracles, or the Holy Spirit, or about heaven and hell. That all feels a bit out there to me.**" That's how many people feel about following Jesus. *Other* people will simply create a *version* of God that doesn't *require* them to believe in those sorts of things. **Thomas Jefferson** famously cut out of his bible every mention of miracles, the supernatural, and claims Jesus made to be divine. Those parts just weren't *necessary* in his mind.²

But **we do this, functionally**, anytime we shy away from the more *difficult* portions of Scripture. Anytime we shy away from a belief in the *supernatural*, or the *miraculous*, or the *prophetic*. Anytime we downplay the more *exclusive, transcendent* claims in the bible. What we're doing in *those* moments is actually strikingly similar to the *Sadducees*: objecting to things the Scriptures teach simply because they feel *absurd* to us.

So **what would Jesus say to us**, in response to that sort of question? Honestly, probably something very similar to what he says to the Sadducees. He tells them that they must not understand the *Scriptures*, or the power of God. The *Scriptures*, because *they* teach the idea. And the *power of God*, because if they don't believe God is capable of something like *that*, there's going to be a lot of other things God does they're going to find absurd also. And I think Jesus would say the same thing to us: he would tell us we need to keep learning and discovering more about the Scriptures, and about God. And

¹ See Deuteronomy 25:5-6

² [Details here.](#)

then we might think about all of this a bit differently. The *third* interaction demonstrates something we might call...

The Theological Question (v. 34-40)

Here's how I would describe *this one*: is Jesus as passionate about certain theological topics as I am? And this one might sound weird, for that to be a way that people *resist* Jesus. But if there's one thing we learn from the Pharisees repeatedly, it's that you can even use *theology* as a means to reject and dismiss Jesus. For instance, read with me, beginning in v. 34:

34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. They want in on the action (again). **35** One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with *this* question: **36** "Teacher, which is the **greatest** commandment in the Law?" **37** Jesus replied: "**Love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' **38** This is the **first and greatest** commandment. **39** And the **second** is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' **40** All the Law and the Prophets hang on **these two** commandments."

So there was a bit of a *theological game* the Pharisees liked to play: **they would sit around with each other and debate what the "weightiest" (or "greatest") commandment was.** They would argue for way too long about which command God *most cared* about his people obeying. And they had *mostly* narrowed it down to two options: it was *either* the command to "love God," or the command to "love your neighbor." One of those, it was thought, was probably the most important command. So here, they want Jesus to weigh in: Jesus, what command is God *most* passionate about?

And *Jesus' answer*, I think, is absolutely *fascinating*. He tells them that the "first and greatest commandment" is "love God..." And *then* he says "...and the *second* is *like* it: love your neighbor." Now, it's not as *obvious* here in the NIV, but that word "like" is the Greek word *homois*. It means that something is "the same as," or "of equal rank to" something else.

So the *conversation would've sounded* something like this: "Jesus, what is the *most important* commandment?" Jesus: "Love God. And the second most important commandment is of *equal* importance to *that* one: love your neighbor." "Wait, so which one is more important: loving God, or loving your neighbor?" Yes. 😬 Do you see why Jesus' teachings frustrated a lot of people? And *then*, as if that answer wasn't confusing enough, Jesus tags this line on: "All of the Law and the Prophets *hang* on these *two*

commandments.” So as it turns out, *all* of the commandments matter because they are *all* direct outworkings of those two commandments. Jesus has provided an extremely *unsatisfying* answer to this question.

But once again: he is **doing that**, at least in part, **because he correctly discerns the *insincerity of their question***. If this group of people had been honestly wanting to learn from what Jesus had to say, chances are his answer to *them* would’ve been different. But as it stands, he’s simply not going to pick a team in their pointless theological debate. To that, Jesus kindly says “no thank you.” **As Eric covered a few weeks ago, Jesus simply is not interested in having theoretical conversations with the Pharisees about theology, all while they are neglecting to hear him out on any of the very *practical* things he is engaging them on.** That’s just not how Jesus rolls.

So **I’ll just say this** and let it fall where it needs to fall. Some of us in the room are very *passionate* about a particular theological topic. Or a particular theological *debate*. Like *very* passionate. To the point that when someone brings it up in a conversation, we almost get a little *giddy* about the conversation. And there are some theological debates and issues that are *worth* being passionate about. But **can I just ask: are we just as *passionate about dealing with any areas in our lives that are currently inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus?*** If we *are*, *great!* Let’s keep being passionate about all of those things. But if *not*, I would recommend that we shift *some* of that passion over to where it’s a little more urgently *needed*. And making sure that we aren’t using theology as a *distraction* for avoiding the things Jesus wants to deal with us *directly on*. That fair? **Jesus cares about theology *too*. He just *also* cares about our hearts.**

And **in the final interaction of this passage**, Jesus going to show us just how much he cares about *both* of those things. Pick it back up with me in v. 41:

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

“Okay,” Jesus says, “but **since we’re on the topic** of theology, I’ve got a theology question for *you* guys: whose *son* is the Messiah?” **The *Messiah*, if you’re unfamiliar, was the long-awaited king and liberator of the Jewish people predicted throughout the Old Testament** (which Jesus has now repeatedly claimed to be). Jesus asks the Pharisees whose *son* that Messiah is. **Now, ancient people used the word “son” loosely, kind of like how *we* use the word “descendant”.** So not *just* the person who is *your* direct offspring, but anyone who comes *after* you in the family line. “Whose *descendent* is the Messiah?” Jesus asks them.

Second half of v. 42:

“The son of David,” they replied. Bingo. Correct answer. But Jesus has a *follow-up* question, v. 43: **43 He 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.””**

The title “lord” was a term of respect used to refer to someone you saw as your *superior*. Kind of like the English word “sir,” but with a lot more significance, because of the honor/shame culture Jesus lived in. So a lot of Jewish people would call their *father* “lord,” but never their *son*. “However,” Jesus says, “in the *psalms*, David calls the *Messiah*, his *son*, ‘lord.’” Verse 45:

45 If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?”

Jesus says it **would make no sense** for David to call a descendent of his “lord,” unless that descendent was actually *more* than a *descendent*. Unless the Messiah he was talking about was even *more* than a Messiah. Unless the Messiah was also God *himself*. Verse 46:

46 No one could say a word in reply (crickets), **and—I absolutely love this part—from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.**

Jesus has **just won a match** of theological *jujitsu*. He has stumped everyone with his knowledge of the Scriptures. But *his* theological question is much more than a *question*. He has simply used *theology* as a means to put them right back into the same corner he’s had them in for the past several chapters. **Everything he just said is just a bible nerd way of asking them the question, “who do you say I am?”** Are you going to acknowledge that I am the Messiah *and* the son of God? Or are you going to keep cooking *up* ways to reject me?

See, at the end of the day, **this is the question** that matters *most*. For the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, the teachers of the law...*and* for you and I. The question, *who is Jesus?* **It’s the question that matters most, because it’s the question that impacts all the others.** All those *other* questions are *important*. *It’s not wrong to ask what political team Jesus is on, especially if you’re prepared for a very nuanced answer. It’s not wrong to wrestle with the more supernatural claims of the Scriptures, and to have difficulty with them. It’s not wrong to care about and debate theological ideas, as long as it’s done for fruitful purposes. But listen: it is wrong to operate as if any of those*

questions are *most* important. It's wrong to give them more priority in your mind than *the* question, *who is Jesus?*

Because, **to put it bluntly**: if Jesus *is* God, what matters *most* is *not* whose political side *he's* on; what matters most is aligning your political preferences with *his*. If Jesus *is* God, what matters most isn't actually whether or not there is such thing as the supernatural; what matters is that you understand he is capable of anything and everything. And if Jesus *is* God, what matters most *isn't* theological minutia or theological debates; it's whether or not *your heart* is aligned with *his*.

If Jesus *is* who he claims to be, then all of those other questions are, at best, secondary. They *matter*. But they do *not* matter *most*. The question you need to answer first is “**who do I believe Jesus *is*?**” Is he who he says he is? Because if so, I can *trust* him as he helps me answer all the other questions. But if he's *not*, there's no reason to even *bother* with the other questions in the first place. The first and most important question all of us must answer is *who is Jesus?*

A while back, a **woman started coming around** our LifeGroup. And even though she would've claimed to be a Christian *beforehand*, the idea of following Jesus actively was a relatively new concept for her. And as she began realizing that and considering that, she had a *lot* of questions. And I mean a *lot*. She was hung up on the idea of hell and judgment and eternity. She was hung up on the idea that self-proclaimed Christians could be responsible for so much evil in the world. She was hung up on the ideas of sexuality and gender identity, and the Christian perspective on all of those things. And plenty more questions along those lines.

And **as she came around** and felt the freedom to *ask* those questions, people helped walk with her through those. They gave her books to read and podcasts to listen to and resources to help her dive into all of those questions and find some answers *to* them. But at one point, as she tells the story, someone said to her over dinner something along the lines of: *I love that you have questions. I love that you feel freedom to ask those questions. I want you to keep asking those questions. But the question you're going to have to decide first is the question: who is Jesus? That is the most pressing question, and that's going to help you navigate all the others.*

And I'm sure it **wasn't just that conversation** that did it—it was the whole process. But *today*, she calls herself a follower of Jesus. And it's not because she got perfectly satisfying answers to all her questions; she would probably tell you she's still working through a *lot* of them. But she *did* decide on an answer to the *most important* question: *who is Jesus?* She decided that he is who he says he is, and therefore he can be trusted

with everything else. So again, as we close: I'm not saying don't have those conversations. I'm not saying don't have and ask and seek answers to those types of questions. / I'm saying don't *operate* as if they're what's *most* important. Answer the most important question first.

And as you seek to answer that one, I'll just tell you: he's left you tons and tons of help along the way. The Scriptures that tell his story, beginning to end. Followers of Jesus in this room that are hungry to walk through all of it patiently with you. Churches, where you can learn and connect with others on the same journey. And the Spirit, who is faithful to come alongside you and help as you discover it all.

And if you're wondering where to start, I'd say start here. Jesus did a lot more than just answer theological questions for people. All of this was leading to a moment in history where he would go to a cross and be crucified. The Scriptures tell us that he did that because he wanted to "seek and save that which was lost." For clarity, that's *you*. That's *me*. Without Jesus, realize it or not, we're *lost*. And Jesus' death and resurrection was him doing something *about* all of that. That's how we know that he can be trusted.

So every week, those of us that claim to know and follow Jesus go to the tables and partake in the bread and the cup, where we can remember and reset on all of that. And if you're here this morning, and you think all of this might be for you, you're welcome to come to the tables for the first time with us. Or if you need to talk to somebody about it all, we're available to do that too. But you've decided he is who he claims to be, let's celebrate that together.

Let's pray.