

Mt 22:34-46 Wrong Questions Lead to Wrong Answers 10-23-11 Pentecost 19A

150 years ago, the rich and the royal came from as far away as Europe and South America to Carthage, North Carolina.

Then, as now, Carthage, North Carolina was a small town in an out-of-the-way area in the south central part of the state.

But it had something going for it. That “something” was the **Tyson & Jones Company**, one of the best-known enterprises in America. The company had won “the race to the top” in its field, and visitors were traveling thousands of miles to buy what they were selling.

Exceedingly high production standards led to the company’s fame, business success, and a gold medal in the 1895 Cotton States Exhibition in Atlanta. Those standards grew out of a question: “**How can we build the best buggies in the world?**”

[It was the] wrong question. The Tyson & Jones Company was in the people-moving business. Karl Benz, Gottlieb Daimler, the Duryea brothers, and Henry Ford, were in the same business, but they were asking a different question: “**Is there a better way to move people than by horse-drawn buggy?**” Everybody knows how that ended. (*Washington Post*, “The Answer Sheet,” 5/23/11, Valerie Straus)

Wrong Questions lead to wrong answers.

We have all had the experience of answering a series of questions on the telephone but never talking to a real person. After all the choices and button pushing we get put on hold to listen to some really [bad] recorded music.

“I DON’T want to choose the type of music I listen to while I am on hold,” said the increasingly irate person wanting to pay a bill over the phone.

It had taken a whole series of committee meetings for the company to come up with the superficially helpful but stupid decision to allow callers to select whether they want pop, hip-hop or classical music while they are on hold.

The problem was that the committee was asking the wrong question. It does not address “how do we reduce the time customers spend on hold?” but instead “how do we make being on hold a better experience?” From that point, the wrong answer is inevitable. (Alex Turner, *Liverpool Daily Post*, 8-3-11)

If we start with the wrong questions we’ll get wrong answers. This is true in business, in the church, in our relationships with our neighbor, and in our relationship with the Lord.

In the Gospels we find Jesus' disciples and the religious leaders posing numerous questions to Jesus in order to trap Him. In each case they think they already know the answer, but Jesus shows they are asking the wrong questions.

Mt 18:1-20 Disciples: Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

Mt 18:21-35 Peter: How many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me?

Mt 19:3 Pharisees: Is it lawful for man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?

Mt 19: 16 Rich young man: Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?

Mt 21:23 Chief priest and elders: By what authority are you doing these things?

Mt 22:17 Pharisees: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?

Mt 22:23-28 Sadducees: If a woman married 7 brothers, whose wife will she be in the resurrection?

We ask the wrong questions too.

When someone is seriously ill, suffering, or even dying, one might ask, "**Why is God letting this happen?**" The answer we often hear is because "God must be punishing me for . . ." or "God can't be involved in everything. A better question might be, "How does God want me to use this situation to bring glory to Him and to witness to His love in Jesus Christ?"

The question might be asked, "**What will I get out of going to church?**" Someone might answer, "I'll get the chance to see my Christian friends that I play golf with or play cards with, etc." Last week I noted what a blessing it is to share our life in Christ together. A better question might be, "What will going to church do to help me love my enemy?" – you know, the person you are in conflict with?"

Question: "**How can I protect my assets in poor economic times?**" If you ask an investment manager you will get certain answers. You might also ask: "What does God want me to do with all that He has given me?" You might well get an answer of a completely different nature.

THE CHURCH HAS ALWAYS BEEN GREAT AT ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS.

You know that the LCMS has more congregations in Michigan than in any other state. Well, you do now. But did you know that Lutheran missionaries began their work among the Cree Indians by trying to teach them the catechism in German? There was time when German Lutherans were asking themselves "**How can we best preserve our German language and heritage?**" It was the wrong question. A better question, one

which the church continues to wrestle with is, “How can we adapt to the people we are trying to reach with the Gospel?”

On Sundays at 1:00 PM on PBS there is a radio program called “**Pipe Dreams.**” Each week the program features one particular pipe organ, usually a church organ and listeners get to listen to some really great organ music. Last Sunday, the narrator highlighted a company that rescues pipe organs from demolition and we heard an organ in Georgia. The company rescues organs from churches that have gone out of business and tries to find new homes for these instruments. The only problem is, very few people in our culture identify with the pipe organ and appreciate pipe organ music. In balconies in churches across America sit pipe organs that are rarely played. If a church fails to adapt to its changing neighborhood and closes its doors, the church and its organ are often demolished. The church that asks itself, “how can we promote the pipe organ and liturgy and hymns, not always, but very often, are often taken out of the game because they have asked _____.

Each time they tried to trap Him with their wrong questions, Jesus **muzzled the interrogators**; with His answer He turned the question back on them to teach them about Himself. In Mt 22: 36 (Gospel reading today) a representative of the Pharisees asked Him, “**What is the greatest commandment?**” He answers, “**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind**” and the second great commandment is like it, “**Love your neighbor as yourself.**” **All the Law and the prophets depend on these two.**” In other word “**love is the fulfilling of the law.**”

The Pharisees and other religious leaders had asked the same question, albeit rephrasing it, and always come up with the same wrong answer. They had subdivided the law and made it into 613 laws to guide them in their ongoing attempts to live the holy life. They had 248 affirmative precepts, one for each bone of the body, which they were supposed to actively obey. They had 365 negative precepts, one for each day of the year, what they were **NOT** supposed to do, for a total of 613. That was also the total number of Hebrew letters in the Ten Commandments.

Their whole lives were consumed with obedience to law – do this – don’t do that. Their **lives were completely oriented around the law**, not the Gospel, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. It is the same question the rich young man had asked, “**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**” Maybe he was the same person just rephrasing his law-based question. But it was the **wrong question** because it assumed there was something he could do – love God and love his neighbor and thereby earn eternal life.

And so Jesus asks them a question to move re-orient their thinking. He asks them a Gospel question. “**What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is He?**” **They said**

to him, **“The son of David.”** Then he asked them, **“How is it then that David, in the Spirit [in Psalm 110], calls him Lord, saying, “The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’? If then, David calls him Lord, how is he David’s son?” AND NO ONE WAS ABLE TO ANSWER HIM A WORD, NOR FROM THAT DAY DID ANYONE DARE TO ASK HIM ANY MORE QUESTIONS.”** Jesus muzzled them again.

It was a **question the Pharisees had probably never asked themselves** because they were always asking themselves questions about the law in such a way that they thought they had obeyed it. It never occurred to them to ask themselves, **“How can we be saved if we CANNOT perfectly love God and neighbor as the law demands?”** They probably never thought of asking themselves, **“What if there IS another way to eternal life than obedience to the law?”** Or, **“What if I am not as good a Pharisee as I think I am?”** Or, **“What if our salvation really is to be found in the Christ and not in ourselves?”** Or, **“What if the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom and not political?”**

That is what Jesus was getting at when he asked **“Whose son is the Christ?”** and **“How could David call him Lord if he was also his son, or fleshly descendant?”** Jesus was pointing out that in Psalm 110 David confessed that the Christ was **true God**, Lord of heaven and earth, and **also true Man**. It’s a **question of who Jesus is**; the same question He asked the disciples, **“Who do people say I am?”** That’s the right question. The wrong answer leads to despair, disappointment, and eternal death. The right answer, Jesus is the Christ, Son of God and son of David, leads to peace, joy, salvation, and eternal life.

People ask the wrong questions all the time.

“How can I get more stuff so I can really be happy?” instead of asking, **“Where can I really find peace, happiness, and contentment?”**

Why is this happening to me? instead of **“How can I glorify God in this situation?”**

“How can I find the right person to marry?” instead of asking, **“How can my faith in Christ help me to be the right person for someone else?”**

“Why is my life so messed up?” instead of **“What does my faith in the Lord . . . ?”**

The question we should be asking is the question Jesus poses again and again to those who challenge Him, **“Who am I?”** What does who I am and my work of suffering, dying, on the cross, and rising from the dead have to do with your happiness, and your marriage and what you think of yourself and your eternal destiny? Amen.