

Questioning People's Answers

Good morning everybody. If you have a bible, turn with me to **Luke 10**. We'll get there here in just a bit. While you're getting there, just out of curiosity: how many of you have watched at least some of the show, **Ted Lasso**? For those of you who *haven't*, the show is about an American college football coach from Kansas, who is hired to coach an English soccer team in London. So there's a lot of your humor right there. But the show **also has a lot of appeal**, I think, **because of Ted Lasso himself**, the main character, played by Jason Sudeikis. If you've watched it, he has this undeniable charm, positivity and warmth to him when faced with seemingly impossible scenarios, and even with a lot of people rooting directly *against* him. It seems like even in those moments, his response is always *kindness*.

But there's **this moment at the end of season 1** when we find out *part* of why he's like that. Don't worry: no spoilers here, but **he reveals** that one of his life mottos is to always "be *curious*, never *judgmental*." He says that that *quote* really shapes how he thinks about people and his relationships with him. So when Ted Lasso comes across people who are different from him, or even people who are *cruel* and *awful* towards him, he evidently doesn't *first* ask "how do I *distance* myself from them" or "how do I get *back* at them?" He thinks, "*man—I sure would love to know more about why they're like that. I want to know more about their story and what makes them think that way or act that way or treat people that way.*" He thinks to himself, "there must be a fascinating *backstory* there; I'm going to do my best to figure out what it is."

And I think that's part of what makes the show so compelling: **in a time in history** when it feels like *everyone* is so quick to rush to conclusions about everyone *else*, quick to write people off and draw really tight lines around who is good and bad, right and wrong... Ted Lasso goes through his life being "*curious*, not *judgmental*." What a different and *refreshing* approach to life, right?

And I **bring that up because** we've been in this series for several weeks now all about *mission*: about *demonstrating* and *articulating* the good news of Jesus to those who don't yet know about it. And today, I thought we could talk for a bit about how we might **capture just a bit of Ted Lasso** in how we approach mission. And really, it's not original to *Ted Lasso*—we're gonna see in just a bit how it's actually from the *bible*. But **in a world when people suspect everyone** (especially Christians) of being *judgmental* towards them, what might it look like to instead, at times, be *curious*?

Now, **at a societal level**, here's why I think that might be *needed*. Whether you and I realize it or *not*, the **landscape has shifted** around us in the past ten or twenty years. It *used* to be that the vast majority of people in our society had some sort of *framework* for religion. *Most people*—Christian or not—*believed* that there was some sort of transcendent entity out there. And they believed that that *entity* could offer us a framework for what is *right* and *wrong*, how to *live*, and how to find *purpose* in this life. A vast majority *believed* that *something* like that was out there. Now they might have *disagreed* on who or what that entity *was*, or how to connect with it—but **the vast majority of people believed that it existed out there somewhere**.

Which meant that **talking to people about Jesus**, in many ways, was just about helping them “connect the dots.” They *wanted some* version of the Christian faith to be true; we just had to help them answer a few key *questions* they *had* in order to arrive there. **Maybe they had questions about the age of the Earth, or about the exclusive claims of Christianity, or about the problem of evil.** Or something else—but generally speaking, **if you could give people satisfactory intellectual answers to their questions, you stood a decent chance at bringing them to a relationship with Jesus.** Put simply, a lot of evangelism *used* to be about *answering people's questions*.¹

But **increasingly**, that's **not how it works anymore**. You might still come across *some* people like that. But more and more, that's not really the dynamic at all. **You and I, as followers of Jesus—we aren't the *gurus* anymore.** More and more, if you go up to the average non-Christian and say “hello—I'm a Christian, and I'm here to answer any questions you have about Christianity,” they're going to look back at you with a *blank stare*. Most people just don't *have those questions* anymore. Or if they *do*, those questions are a good bit more *confrontational* and *antagonistic* in their tone, not *genuinely curious*. **Increasingly, people aren't wanting the message of Jesus to be true, and just waiting on someone to come along and answer their questions. They might not even feel a need for it to be true in the first place.**

Most people out there right now **already have** a set of **answers** to life's biggest questions. Questions like *why are we here? What is our purpose? What is life all about? What does it mean to be a “good person”?* Even those who wouldn't know how to *articulate* their answers to those questions, at least operate out of *functional* answers to them. They've already decided what life is all about and how to work *towards* the best life they can. And for the most part, people tend to be pretty *satisfied* with their answers. They're pretty *content* with their existing worldviews.

¹ I've borrowed this language, and a lot of the thinking in the previous paragraphs, from Tim Keller's recent e-book, *How to Reach the West Again*.

Which means that if we are going to be effective in reaching people with the gospel, we will have to rethink our *methods* a little from what has worked the past 10, 20, 50 years. Not rethink *what* we're doing, but rethink the *methods* we are accustomed to using to do it. Increasingly, **evangelism—telling people about Jesus—is not just about answering people's questions. More and more, it's about “questioning people's answers.”**² We will have to learn to ask enough questions to discern what people's worldviews *are*, and then look for inroads there to the gospel. Put simply, **part of evangelism in the twenty-first century looks like getting really good at asking questions.** Or to use Ted Lasso's language, learning to be “*curious*” about *people*.

But like I mentioned a moment ago, this isn't some sort of *new, innovative, evangelism method* that I or Ted Lasso have come up with. **This is actually what Jesus himself did.** Jesus was an absolute *expert* at asking questions. Which might seem a little odd to us, since we usually think of Jesus as the guy with all the *answers*. But if you just read through the gospels, beginning to end, you might be surprised at just how often Jesus asked people *questions*, when we probably would expect him to give *answers*. So I want to walk you through just *one* of those instances today, and see what we can learn from it.

Let's take a look at our passage. Luke 10, starting in v. 25:

[25] On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to **test Jesus**. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I **do** to inherit **eternal life**?”

Now, if this were an *exercise* in an evangelism seminar, this is what we would call a “tee-ball” question. Right? I mean, just imagine that you've been building a relationship with a co-worker or a classmate or a friend for years, and you've been *praying* for God to give you an opportunity to talk with them about Jesus. And then imagine they sit down in front of you one day and go “excuse me. Thanks for the coffee this morning. I was just wondering: what must I *do* to inherit *eternal life*?”

I mean this would be the *ideal scenario*, would it not? This is the day you've been *waiting* for! This is your opportunity to say “well here's what sin is, and here's how sin separates you from God, here's what you need to acknowledge about all that, here's the prayer you pray, and (tada!) you're a Christian. You're welcome for that.” That's what I think a lot of us would be inclined to do in this scenario. But as we're going to see in a second, that's not really how *Jesus* responds to the question at *all*.

² I borrowed this thinking and language directly from Tim Keller in his recent e-book, *How to Reach the West Again*.

And that's **because**—catch this—**Jesus realizes** that this question **isn't really a question** at all. As it says in the passage, this guy is trying to “test Jesus.” He's not genuinely wanting an *answer*—he's wanting Jesus to *agree* with *his* answer. In other words, **his “question” is really just an answer in disguise.** And I'll just go ahead and tell you: **even in the rare occasions today** that you *do* get a question from someone about Christianity or Jesus, at least the majority of the time, it's not actually a *question*. It's an *answer* in disguise. If a person comes to you and asks “why are Christians so strict in their thinking about sex and sexuality?” that's not actually a question. It's *phrased* like one, but it's not one. What they're actually saying is “sexuality shouldn't be thought about that way, and it's *bothersome* that *Christians* think about it that way.” So that's not **actually a question; that's an answer.** Which *means* that if you *answer* it straight as if it were a genuine question, it won't get you much of anywhere with the other person. And you may miss an opportunity to *further* the discussion.

Okay, **Jesus realizes all of that** in *this* story. Which is why he answers this guy's question—not with an rehearsed plan of salvation, or with a well thought-out *defense* of the faith—but with a *question* of his *own*. Continue with me in v. 26. Jesus responds to the man:

[26] “What is written in the **Law?**” ~~he replied.~~ “How do **you read it?**”

~~So Jesus either whiffs at the tee-ball here...or he realizes that there is a far more helpful way to respond to this question. And since it's Jesus, I'm gonna say it's probably the latter. He asks this man “what is written in the Law? How do you read it?” So~~ **what Jesus is trying to do** with this question, essentially, is figure out this guy's *worldview*. How he views the world. Which, for *him*, is how he reads the Old Testament *law*. **How does he think about morality and ethics? What does he think a “good person” is? How does he see the world? What does he think the answers to life's biggest questions are?** That's what Jesus is trying to figure out from this guy. Jesus isn't about to answer a question about eternal life without *some* understanding of where this guy is *coming* from. Jesus *knows* that most people's *questions* are just *answers* in disguise. So he asks the guy to *unpack* his “answers” a little more.

Which **the guy does**, v. 27:

[27] He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

He basically sums up *his understanding* of the Old Testament Law. Now, we know from elsewhere that this is **precisely how Jesus himself** also sums up the Old Testament Law.³ So Jesus says, v. 28:

[28] “You have answered **correctly**,” Jesus replied. “Do **this** and you will live.”

Interesting. **Jesus basically just says**, “what do you need *me* for? Sounds like you’ve already got your *answer* all figured out. Do *that*, and you will have the life you’re looking for.” Now, this is *fascinating* to me: this guy has a question for Jesus about *eternal life*. And Jesus is about to send him away with no answer, *other* than the one he already *had*. I’m not just saying this to be cheeky: I genuinely think if Jesus took an evangelism class in the 21st century, a lot of us would *flunk* him. We’d be like “hey man—I don’t know if you’re cut out for this evangelism thing.” Like, doesn’t this seem like a missed opportunity?

But **Jesus knows exactly what he’s doing**, because the guy has a *follow-up* question for him, v. 29:

[29] But he wanted to **justify himself** (remember how we said that most questions are answers in disguise? Yep, that’s *exactly* what’s happening here. The guy didn’t actually want an *answer* from Jesus, he wanted Jesus to *validate his* answer...), **so he asked Jesus** (another question), “And **who is my neighbor?**”

Now, **if you’ve read this passage before**, you’ll know that Jesus actually responds to *this* question with a **parable**: a story about the so-called “good Samaritan.” I won’t read through it all in detail, since most of us are probably already familiar with the basic details of the story. But what’s interesting to me is that **at the end of the story**, Jesus *still* doesn’t give an answer. He actually asks *another* question. Jesus is *relentless* with asking questions. Skip down with me to v. 36:

[36] “Which of these three (people in the story) **do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?**”

Jesus *still* isn’t going to give the guy a straightforward answer to his question. He’s going to **make the guy answer his own question**. And this is what Jesus *did*: he asked *questions*. He loved answering *questions*, with *more questions*. He loved responding to people’s *answers* with more questions. If you get the time, I would encourage you just to read through the gospels and make a note of how often Jesus does this. **One guy I read**

³ See, for example, places like Mark 12:30-31.

from counted up 223 questions Jesus asked in the gospels. He said that best he can tell, Jesus only answers a question directly when it's asked *four times*.⁴ Jesus loved asking *questions*.

But **why?** Why does Jesus respond this way to people? Why not just give straight answers? Well at least *part* of it has to do, I think, with who and what Jesus *was*. Jesus was a **first century rabbi**, and this is how *rabbis* often taught. They didn't sit around and wait for *you* to ask *them* questions; they usually asked their *students questions*. They weren't interested in giving you, as a student, answers to regurgitate back to *them*; they were interested in helping you *think well* for yourself.

But I think there are **a few more reasons** as well, that we can walk through together. And feel free to jot these down if you find them helpful. **First**, I think Jesus asked questions **because he loved people**. There's another story in the gospels about a **"rich young ruler"** who comes to Jesus with a question. Jesus, again, asks *him* a question in return. And then a few verses later it says that before responding *again*, Jesus looked at the man and "*loved him*." He *loved and cared deeply* for this man asking him the question.⁵ Jesus **interacted with people the way he did because** he deeply *loved and cared for* people.

To put it another way, I think **Jesus cared more about the person asking the question, than he did about the question being asked**. Jesus *knew* that behind every question or answer or belief people have, there is a *real person* with a *real story*. A person with experiences and hurts and scars and wounds. A person with plausibility structures in their mind that prevent and discourage them from accepting even the most *convincing* of answers. Jesus knew that **often, what people need is not actually a well-rehearsed, theological treatise of an answer to their question. Often what they most need is to be seen and heard and understood by another person**. And that's something that asking *questions* can help us accomplish. ~~Make sense?~~

Second, I think Jesus asked questions **because (questions) help people think critically about their beliefs**. Jesus did this *constantly* in his interactions with the *Pharisees*. They would come to him and ask if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, to which he would ask *them*, "if *you* had a sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, would *you* rescue *it*?" He's helping them think critically about their *own* interpretation of the Law. They would come to him and say "should we pay taxes to Caesar?" And he would ask *them*, "well whose image is on the coin?"

⁴ From Dan Grider's book, *Crucial Conversations*.

⁵ See Mark 10:17-21, especially v. 21.

So do you see what Jesus is doing? He is **using questions as a way of encouraging people to think critically about their own beliefs**. He is *questioning people's answers*. And I'll just tell you: if you do this with people out of a place of *friendship* and with the appropriate *gentleness*, it can often be really helpful. Answering questions is how we *all* learn to fine-tune our beliefs about the world. That's often what Jesus was trying to help people do with *his* questions: he was challenging them to think critically about their predetermined answers about the world.

And then lastly, I think Jesus asked questions **because he trusted the Father to do what he couldn't**. We're all familiar with the line from Jesus where he says "I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me," right? And that's true. But Jesus also says "**no one can come to me unless the Father draws him**" (John 6:44). Think about that for a second: **Jesus, the king of the world, acknowledges that he is not the decisive factor in whether or not people come to know him. And neither are his answers to their questions. The decisive factor is the Father drawing them.**

And **listen: if Jesus himself wasn't the decisive factor, then certainly we aren't either, right?** And certainly our ability to answer *questions* isn't. What a person *needs* from you isn't ultimately a few intellectually satisfying answers to their questions. Those can be *useful and helpful, sure*—but they aren't the determining factor in whether or not that person comes to faith. **The determining factor is whether or not the Father draws them. So I just want you to breathe that in for a second: if Jesus didn't think his intelligent answers were sufficient to bring people into relationship with him, he surely doesn't expect yours to be either. That's not your job.** Your job is to befriend people, *ask questions*, give answers when you're given the opportunity, and *trust the Father to do what only he can do*. What a *relief* that should be for us in this room.

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So, those are just a few reasons Jesus asked questions, and probably why we should as well. Hopefully those give us some things to dwell on this week. // But before we wrap up, I wanted to try and get **really practical for a bit**: what types of *questions* are we talking about asking exactly? There is virtually no *limit* to the types of questions we can ask in talking to someone about Jesus. But I want to at least give you **some categories and some examples** to get you started. I want to put some tools in your toolbox, so to speak—and then trust the Holy Spirit *in* you to know *when* to ask which *ones*. Make sense?

Okay. So *some* questions are **conversational questions**. They are simply ways to further the conversation, to **extend the discussion**, and discover more about what the other person just said or asked. These are questions like:

- Can you tell me more about that?
- Could you say that in a different way?
- Will you elaborate on that a little?
- I've heard people say that before. What does that mean exactly?

I once heard somebody say that you can even do this without saying a *word*. They said if you're at coffee or eating with someone, sometimes after they say something, you can just pause and take another sip of your drink, and that will prompt the person to elaborate on what they just said. It's like a nonverbal cue. So maybe even just do that. But **however you do it, look for ways** to keep the conversation going. People generally have lots of things to say about what they believe and what they think. So one of the best things you can do is just show them you're interested in hearing more. Who knows, you might actually *learn* something new. Or bare *minimum*, you will learn more about *that person*, which you probably wouldn't have otherwise.

Which leads to the **next category**, which is **personal questions**. These questions are designed, not just to get to know more about what the other person *said*, but to get to know more about *them* as a *person*. These would be questions like:

- You sound really *passionate* about that. How did that come about for you?
- I can tell this issue is really personal for you. Would you be willing to share more about why?
- What makes you say that exactly?
- Could I hear more about that part of your story sometime?

These questions are **ways of communicating to the other person** that you care as much about *them* as you do about formulating a perfect answer to their question, or a response to their worldview. You're helping to remind them (and yourself) that both of you are humans with stories and hurts and baggage, and that you have no interest in buffering those parts of us out of important conversations with them. *Personal* questions can be really helpful in doing that.

And then there are **philosophical questions**. Questions like:

- Do you think there's such a thing as a "good person"?
- What *makes* a person good?
- Do you believe there *evil* people in the world? What do you think should be done about that?
- In your opinion, what is the problem with the world?

- What do you think would solve the problems in our world?

These are questions to help you wrap your mind around the other person's worldview, and over time, subtly challenge them to think critically about it. We've mentioned this before, but a person can only cast doubt on the claims of Christianity if they are *standing* on beliefs of their own. So it follows that *those* beliefs should *also* be subject to questions. Philosophical questions are ways to do that—to do it gently and compassionately, but still do it. // So there are conversational, personal, and philosophical questions. And probably lots of other categories too. But the hope is that those at least give you a place to start.

So as we conclude, I wanted to just to share one example of how this can go. Several years back I knew a guy we'll call *David*. He and I had known each other for a year or two. We had had all sorts of conversations about all sorts of things—most of them fairly surface level. But one day, the topic of conversation started veering, on its own, towards the actions of certain Christians in the public square. In general, towards some dumb and unChristlike things Christians had done. And he said something to the effect of “but that's just who Christians are, I guess.”

Now, everything in me in that moment wanted to go “no, it's not! Christians *shouldn't* act like that and that type of behavior *isn't* who we are at all! It's the exact *opposite* of who we are!” That's what I *wanted* to say, but instead, I decided to just ask him one of those conversational questions. I just said “what do you mean by that?” To which David replied, “well, don't Christians think that anyone who doesn't believe what they believe are bound for hell? Because if so, it makes sense that they would be really mean-spirited to people of other belief systems.” Now again, I wanted to argue with him there, because that actually *doesn't* make sense to me logically—that that belief would lead to that behavior. But instead, I asked another question: “Do you believe there's such a thing as hell?” A philosophical question of sorts. He said “no.”

So I said, “so what do you think happens to evil people, then?” Another philosophical question. David said, “well I guess I believe that they get caught and brought to justice.” So then I said, “sure—some of them do. But what about the other ones? What about the ones that did evil things, but didn't get caught? What about the people who do evil things that aren't *illegal*—just harmful to others?” I asked him specifically about his dad. I knew from bits and pieces of David's story that his dad was a horrible person. I knew that from asking *personal* questions. To my knowledge, his dad didn't do anything illegal—just very selfish and angry and destructive in his patterns of behavior towards others. I asked David, “what happens to people like *that*?” Another *philosophical* question of sorts.

David stopped and thought about it for a second, and then said, “well I guess I believe that it all shakes out in the end. ‘What goes around comes around,’ you know?” But as he said it, I could tell that he wasn’t all that satisfied with his answer. It was like you could tell he *wanted* to believe that that’s how it worked, but wasn’t really sure that it did.

So I just spoke up in that moment—not with a full gospel presentation, or with a diagram about how he could be saved—but just by saying, “well I think you and I have more in common than we might think. Because I, as a Christian, *also* believe that ‘it all shakes out in the end.’ The main difference, I think, is that I believe there is a person *in charge* of it all shaking out that way. A person who can be trusted to address the evil all around us. And *because* I believe that, I don’t personally have to hang onto bitterness and anger towards evil people in the world, or even in my life. Because I can trust that one way or another, one day, God will handle it.”

And we just sort of sat there for a second. He thought about that for a moment or two, and then the topic of conversation changed to something else. I wish I could tell you that he responded to what I said with a “well what do you *mean* ‘one way or another’?” And then I got to explain to him that God either deals with evil people in hell or he deals with it by absorbing their sin onto himself on the cross. That would’ve been awesome. I prayed for as long as we were friends that he *would* ask that question—but he never did. David now lives hundreds of miles away, and I probably haven’t spoken to him in several years.

And to my knowledge, David still hasn’t decided to follow Jesus. But I find myself praying, every so often, that something about that conversation made David at least a little less *sure* of his “answers.” That maybe, that piqued his curiosity about a different way to view the world and his life. And that maybe one day, that uncertainty will lead him to investigate whether or not there are *better* answers *out there*. And my prayer is that God puts someone or something in his life that leads him to consider the way of Jesus. But this is where it all comes back to what we said earlier—I’ve got to trust the Father to do what I can’t do.

But all that said, do you see how that conversation went very differently than it would’ve if I would have just answered him with “yes—I believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and anyone who doesn’t believe that goes to hell.” If I would’ve done that, the conversation would’ve been *over*. Now I ended up with virtually the same *conclusion*, but I asked *questions* in order to arrive there. And in the meantime, we turned an *obstacle* he had, into a *bridge* of sorts, at least in theory. And it happened simply because I spent some time *questioning* his *answers*. And that’s what we’re going for.

So before we wrap up here, I do want to be **very clear about one thing**. **Hopefully we realize that the goal is not *just* to ask questions forever**. You can't share the good news of Jesus with people if *all* you ever do is ask questions. But at the same time, I don't know that many of us lean towards asking *too many questions*. I think we lean towards not asking *enough*. In Proverbs, it says "he who gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame." I think a lot of Christians try to tell people the gospel before we've truly heard where they're coming from. **And I wonder if by asking more questions, we could learn more about the other person and what they believe, so that when the opportunity comes to talk to them about Jesus, we can do it more helpfully than we would otherwise**. That's the goal.

So each week during this series, we're participating in a **practice** to help grow in demonstrating and articulating the gospel. It's all available in our **practice guide** that you can find in the lobby or at citychurchknox.com. And this week's practice is simply called *Gospel Bridges & Obstacles*.

The way that it works is that you think through specific people in our life that don't follow Jesus. You **start with your best understanding** of that person's "life purpose statement." In other words, how would they summarize what life is all about? What would they say the purpose of life is? These are the things that you're largely going to pick up from observation of their life, and from asking good *questions*. And then, based on that "life statement" of theirs, think about ways that runs *parallel* to the good news of Jesus, but also what ways it runs *contrary* to it. Gospel "bridges" and gospel "obstacles." And maybe the biggest thing *you* take away from the practice is that you need to ask some more questions to figure out what that person's worldview *is*. And that's great! Start there.

But **the goal** is that the Spirit uses this to help us ask good questions, and look for inroads and opportunities to speak the good news of Jesus. So that's what we'll work through this week.

Let me pray for us.