

Questions
Matthew 22:15-46
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Stuart Jones

[Wayne Koch] As I've said, Stu Jones is here on behalf of the session of Columbia Presbyterian Church. I welcome you, Stu, to our pulpit. Stu is a teaching elder in the OPC, long-time pastor of First OPC in Baltimore. I know him mostly from going to the couple of presbyteries I've gone to where Stu is a man of wisdom and one that people look to for really helping us through some thorny issues. But more importantly for this congregation, Stu and Sandy are co-grandparents with Pete and Pattie of that next-gen Floyd group, Kaylee and Reagan. And so welcome, Grandpa Stu, to the pulpit.

[Stuart Jones] I love that Grandpa title. Sometimes I'm known to one or two of them as Hiya-Hiya, but there's a story behind that I won't go into. Our passage this morning is from Matthew chapter 22, beginning at verse 15. There are four brief interrogations in this chapter—three interrogations, or attempted interrogations, in which they try to put Jesus on the spot, and a final one in which Jesus asks some of his own questions. You'll notice that as we go through. I begin reading at verse 15 from the English Standard Version.

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her."

But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David, in the Spirit, 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 his son?” And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Our Heavenly Father, we pray that you will give us the blessing of your Holy Spirit working in our midst, in my heart, in my mouth, in our hearts, and in our ears, that we might hear from you this day, that you might, Lord, lead us in the path of wisdom, lead us in the path that enables us to fall before Jesus Christ and trust in him as the One who is our wisdom and who is our salvation. We pray in his Name. Amen.

I’ve spoken on this passage a number of times, and there’s always something fresh about it as I come to it. The one thing that I still come back to is the last verse. And I can’t help—maybe I find humor where I’m not supposed to, but I still think it’s humorous that after all of these attempts to trip up Jesus—the first attempt, they just said, okay, we give up, we leave. And then another group comes. And finally they send a lawyer. And then finally, Jesus says, hey, it’s my turn. Let me ask you a question. And they’re utterly confounded by the time this whole process is done. By the way, maybe you recognize that last little confrontation. It’s where the Psalm 110 reference comes in. But in any event, I can’t help but find it amusing that it sort of ends like this—let’s not ask him any more questions. When you’re digging yourself into a deeper hole, stop digging. And it’s a fascinating thing to me, that here were all of these people, and not only did Jesus give them the correct answer—he gave them the wise answer, and he gave them the answer that confounded them in many instances.

Questions are not simply asked for the purpose of gaining information. Questions have a number of purposes. The very first question in the Bible was not a very good question, if you may remember what that question was. And it wasn’t really there to gain information, was it? Sometimes questions are just asked to see if we’re paying attention—husband to wife, or more often perhaps, wife to husband. Are you still there? Questions are also a way of asserting some authority, of rebuking, at times, of getting to the heart. Also early in Genesis, we have the question, where are you? That could have begun with, why are you hiding? Or it could have been stated in a more indicative fashion, to just say, you can’t hide from me. You’ve sinned.

But the question has a special power to it. There’s a story—I don’t remember where I read it—of the Jewish rabbinic student who asks his rabbi, “Rabbi, why do rabbis always answer a question with a question?” “So what’s wrong with a question?” Jesus seems to do that. They ask him a question, and very often his first response is another question. Now, I would love to go through all four of these incidents, but I don’t want to wear out your patience. We will probably pay more attention to the first one, shall we pay taxes to Caesar or not. But it’s interesting how Jesus responds. And it seems to me, you can see a bit of a pattern. Very often—not always, but very often—his first response will be a question, and then there will be some very astounding statement, and then another question. A sandwich kind of effect.

He’s being set up. He’s being set up with the first question. In some ways, this first interrogation is the most serious one. I think they thought they would throw all of their effort into this one. Shall we pay taxes to Caesar or not? If he says yes, he loses a big audience of the common person who hasn’t yet arrived at a full understanding of the nature of Jesus’ kingdom, and that until that kingdom is fully consummated at his second coming—they didn’t realize there was going to be a second coming of the

Messiah—until it's fully consummated, that we pay our taxes to those who are in power and authority. But they didn't fully understand that. And that would have been a side issue.

One of the questions for our reflection is, is the accurate answer always the wise answer? We can get in a lot of discussion with people in which we get distracted. They ask, well, what about evolution? Or what about this? Or what about that? And we never get around to talking about Christ. We never get around to talking about who Jesus is and why he came, because we're talking about that—an important issue. And we may give the right answer. But have we given the wise answer by getting ourselves on a tangent? And maybe an important tangent, and something that should be answered—but not necessarily something that we should spend all of our time talking about. And so very often, that's where wisdom comes in—knowing how to get the message out that God wants to be underlined and emphasized. And the message, of course, is Jesus Christ. You can have the right views on a great many subjects, but if you don't have Jesus Christ at the center of your life, if he's not your Savior and Lord, having all the right answers is not going to get you into heaven. And so we need to recognize that Christ is at the beginning and the end of our wisdom.

Now, as I indicated earlier, he is being set up with that first question. They come to him and they say—it sounds like flattery, but I think it's really trying to frame the way Jesus is supposed to answer the question—we know you're a straight talker, Jesus, and you don't care what people think. You don't care what the common man thinks. You're just going to speak the truth if we ask you a question, and let the chips fall where they may. So is it right to pay taxes to Caesar? Yes or no? If he says yes, he loses his audience with the common people. If he says no, he can be branded a revolutionary, and those people who hear the answer can go back to Pilot, Caesar, whoever is around, and say, we have a revolutionary on our hands who doesn't want taxes paid to the Roman state, you better do something about it. And so Jesus is put on the horns of a dilemma.

Now, the natural inclination would be to look for the accurate explanation and say, well, on the one hand, there is this, on the other hand, there is that. I still remember the statement of Harry Truman. He says, "What I want is a one-armed economist. I'm tired of on the one hand this and on the other hand that." And so you have this situation. How does Jesus live up to the set up? You're a straight talker. Well, it seems to me Jesus lives up to that set up. Yeah, I'm a straight talker—you're a bunch of hypocrites. How's that for straight talk? But it really begins with a question. Why are you putting me to the test? Before he answers the question, he gets to the question of why the question is asked in the first place. He gets to the deeper root. What is the purpose of asking the question? And then there's the, you're hypocrites.

I have looked at this passage to try to gain a perspective on how to converse and to communicate with people in a controversial, whether we should follow Christ or not. And I've come away with two conclusions. One is that you can't imitate Jesus in absolutely everything that he did. But two, there are principles that are still there that you can learn from. And can you ever, in a situation, just point your finger and say, you're a hypocrite? It's probably not the way that you're going to win somebody to Christ. There may be some situation. I'm not going to try to exercise my mind too far on it, where that would be appropriate. But you can say that of Jesus, that was appropriate. You can say, for me, not so sure. It's like Jesus going into the temple and chasing the moneychangers out. Jesus could do that. That was a statement about his absolute, unique authority. He calls it my Father's house that you're making a place of business. He's saying that I have an interest in the title deed on this house, this temple. You're trespassing. You're making it a house of business. I can't do that. I can't walk into any church. I mean, there are times, you know, you say, wouldn't it be fun to walk into some liberal church that is denying the gospel and stand up and create a scene? But I don't have that authority to just go in and do those kinds of things. Jesus could do that. I can't. And so there are things that Jesus can do—you know, that question, what would Jesus do? That's not an infallible clue to guidance. The question is, what does Jesus want you to do? What does Jesus want me to do? So there is some distinction we have to make.

That said, I believe that there is a certain audacity present in Jesus that we can take over and say, you know, there is a time to be bold. Maybe not judgmental in the way that Jesus can judge the hearts of men and women, but there is a place for boldness. I noticed that there is a certain audacity among the new atheist crowd. I teach apologetics at New Covenant Christian School up near Aberdeen, up I-95. My mind's failing me where do I teach. In any event, in the course of teaching apologetics, we get into these kinds of issues, questions. What do you do? How do you answer people? And evangelism and apologetics are related. I don't know that they're identical, but they're certainly related. But we always have to keep in mind, what is our purpose? What is our purpose as we seek to answer people? Is it to bolster up our own faith? We can do that with fellow believers. We can do that in our own prayer and Bible study. But as we speak to somebody else, it's not about us. It's not about proving how smart we are. It's about trying to figure out how to reach that person. But there is a time, I believe, for boldness and audacity.

I've given our students some debates to watch. Youtube has some interesting debates in that regard. And I'll have them listen to Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens, who now knows that God is alive and well. But there is an interesting characteristic of some of these new atheists, and that is that they have a certain audacity. And that will sometimes put you off your game when you're shocked, you know? Somebody says, God's not good—or something worse than that, really blasphemous—and it takes your breath away. It takes you by surprise. There's a place for us to be audacious, to ask certain thought-provoking questions, and to perhaps make a statement that makes somebody think. Before we can make them think, we have to think. We have to have mediated and thought through situations. And so these scenarios that we have in Matthew 22, I think, are helpful in that regard.

One of the things I do first week in class is I say, okay, I want to paint a scenario for you. It's your first day in college. You didn't get the course you wanted, so you had to sign up for Philosophy 101, and you're walking into the classroom, and you're rushing from the previous class. And you know more than just get seated, then the professor points to you and says, prove to me there's a God. What do you do? You're caught off guard. That's one of the advantages to some categorical approach to life, to having some readymade answers that we know are true. And I've suggested to the students, there are a couple of things you could do in such a situation.

One is, you could do what Jesus did and answer a question with a question. What would you accept as proof? Now, I could trace that rabbit trail a good ways, and it depends on how much the professor would let you continue to ask the questions. He wants to ask the questions, obviously. But that question, if he answers it, will expose his worldview. And his worldview cannot hold up to the true worldview if he doesn't believe in Christ. So answering a question with a question. What would you accept as proof?

The other one is one that you would have to memorize as a kind of categorical answer. And I tell my students, that's what the rest of the course will be about, is explaining this answer. Well, your question is the proof of God, because the triune God of Scripture is the presupposition of the possibility of any meaningful predication, and therefore, for your question to make sense, God exists. Now, that obviously requires some discussion and some explanation. And that's why it takes a whole course to go through what is meant by that answer. But having some thought-out responses is not wrong. As we begin to internalize those responses, we may find ourselves able to answer more spontaneously the questions people bring to us.

Now, that question of answering a question with a question, again, exposes the person's worldview. As you get into the discussion, you will have to eventually say something besides just asking questions. And so Jesus makes some assertions. Jesus makes some bold assertions, on occasion. Jesus does so out of a worldview that is so informed by the truth of God that that's what I think is the overwhelming power of his responses. Show me a coin. They pull out a coin. Whose image is on that? Caesar's. Now, he could have asked some more questions. He might have asked, what is a good Jewish person like you doing with a graven image of Caesar? What are you carrying that around for? But his response is, give to Caesar what is Caesar's, give to God what is God's. Some ancient church fathers have

suggested that there may be a fuller depth to that, that we are the image of God. So if there's any question about whole-hearted commitment to God, then give to God his image. That's what you are. And so there is that kind of powerful statement that works out of a worldview that understands that all human beings are made in the image of God.

There are a number of things that we might consider in terms of the principles, to just try to bring this together in a discussion. The first, Jesus tries—or he does, he doesn't try—he assesses the real purpose of the question. And as we are in discussions with people, we don't have the same infallibility to look into somebody's heart, to know the purpose behind their question. But we should make an effort to try to understand where the question is coming from. As far as we can, why are they asking that question?

I still remember, it was probably my second or third year of college, going to the Urbana Missionary Convention in Urbana, Illinois. And they had a Keynote speaker there. Yeah, this may be hard to believe, but I was a long-haired hippie Jesus freak at the time. I went up and asked a question about something that was bothering me. One gospel account has two angels at the empty tomb. Another gospel account has one angel. It doesn't bother me anymore. Probably doesn't bother any of you. I assume there were two angels, and that one of the gospel writers decided he wasn't going to bother talking about the other one. But for some reason, that was bothering me. I wanted to believe the Scriptures. I did believe the Scriptures. And I asked this question. And probably because I was a long-haired hippie Jesus freak, the speaker looked like, what's he up to? You know? And I didn't really get so much an answer as sort of a skepticism about, why are you asking the question? I later went to one of the seminary booths where Doctor Edmund Clowney was, asked the same question. I don't remember exactly what his answer was, but it satisfied me, and I walked away.

You see, I had an honest question as far as any of us can have an honest question. Yes, there's always a mixture. But some questions are more honest than others, and mine was basically an honest question. If you have an honest question about the Bible, about Jesus Christ, don't be afraid of that honest question. Go find somebody who knows their Bible. Talk to your spiritual leaders. Talk to your elders, your pastor, if he has time. I know he's a busy man, so I won't volunteer his time up here. But ask somebody. And don't be afraid to ask the question. But don't think that you're going to get the answer to every single one of your questions in this life, either. There will always be questions. It's just that after you walk with Christ for a while, you begin to learn that there's an answer to that question. I don't know what it is, but there's an answer to that question. So if someone asks you a question, try to understand where they're coming from. It may be a perfectly sincere question. Even the not-so-sincere question can be an occasion for an opening and a discussion that turns back to Christ.

I've already talked about audacity. I remember I was on a panel in upstate New York when I was an associate pastor at a church. It was at Union College, and they had an atheist and an agnostic and me on this panel, and we were having a discussion. And I made some statement to the effect that that scientific view that we just heard is really a religious view. Now, that's an audacious sounding thing to someone who thinks that you can compartmentalize science and religion, and that the two have absolutely nothing to do with each other. But the point—and you don't have to lay all your cards on the table at once—but the point is that God is a God of order, and it's because God is a God of order that science works. If there's no order in this world, science doesn't work very well. It's pretty hard to talk about a law of gravity if I drop a pen and it goes up. But what does the atheist or agnostic have to ground his assumption that when I drop the pen, it will always go down? Because it's always happened in the past? Well, maybe it's used up its allotted number of opportunities. How do we know? There's a faith. There's an assumption. There's a recommitment to a worldview that has to be there to make science work. All kinds of principles. Occum's razor. Why? Well, because that's what we think we need to have to make science work. But that's a kind of faith—a religious view.

Then, there's—finally—the idea of reaching the heart. And I'll tell you a brief story of a man named Dave in Omaha. I believe this was also, I think it was late college-early seminary time for me. I was back in Omaha, Nebraska. There had been a Jesus movement coming through. Dave had made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, but he was slipping away. He was kind of an intellectual. And he decided, I don't believe Jesus is the Son of God. I don't believe he's God. And I was there, and I was concerned. I thought, well, Dave has heard the message. Dave knows the message. He's heard it. So I guess it's time to not just give the message in the same way again. So I said to Dave, well, what would you accept as proof? The same question I put to the students that you could ask if you're put in that situation in a philosophy classroom. And I watched Dave. And his wheels began to spin. And he thought about it, and he said, if I heard a voice from heaven. I said, Dave, turn to Matthew 3:16. Oh, you know the story. Jesus is baptized in the River Jordan. The Holy Spirit comes down as a dove, and a voice from heaven—this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.

Now, I knew what Dave's next response was going to be. Oh, that's just in the Bible. I wasn't concerned about that next response. I was concerned to begin preaching. I said, Dave, when I asked you that question, I watched, and you sat there, and you thought of the hardest thing you could think of. And when I showed you that it had happened once in history, you came up with another excuse. And you know what, Dave? There will always be excuses. You will always be able to find a reason. If the voice spoke now, you could wake up tomorrow and say maybe I was hallucinating, or the devil said it, or who knows what. There's always an excuse. But that's not the problem. And so instead of just giving the answer—maybe I was too audacious, maybe I was too blunt, I don't know. But I was trying to get him to reflect on his motives in his heart.

What is in your heart? I trust most, maybe all of you, know Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. But maybe there's somebody here who is here because they got dragged along by a friend or a spouse or somebody. And you've always had a reason not to trust in Jesus Christ, not to surrender your life to him. There will always be some question you can ask, and there will be some questions that you can ask that nobody will be able to answer in this life. When's Jesus coming again? I don't know. Some people may think they know. I don't know. But the truth of God, as we saw in one of the passages earlier, is clear. According to Paul in Romans chapter 1, it's just that we like to confuse ourselves. Because if we can confuse ourselves enough, then we can say, I'm not responsible. God didn't make it clear enough. I'm amazed. Again, I teach at a school. It's a Christian school, but no matter how clear I make the deadline for the assignment to be turned in, there's always a reason why it didn't get turned in on time.

We don't need excuses. All we need is Christ. He died on the cross to pay for our sins and rose again from the dead so that we could be justified by what he did and not by our excuses. Our excuses will not cut it with God. Your excuses will not cut it with God. But if you turn to Jesus Christ today, you can know that your sins are forgiven and that you have new life. And if you have any questions about that, there are people wearing little tags—I'll volunteer them. You talk to one of them and say, I want to know more about this. And you can begin a new life, a clean life—not because you're clean, but because Christ is clean and gives us a new heart and a new mind and a hope for all eternity. Let us pray.

Lord our God, even our wisest wisdom is foolishness compared to you. Our best attempts to give answers pale in comparison to what our Lord Jesus did. We thank you that it wasn't so much an argument, but a sacrifice, that opened the way to knowing you. We thank you for that sacrifice of love that shows us that you are trustworthy, because your love was so great you gave your only begotten Son for us. Help anyone here who doesn't know you or who is unsure to come to know you through him who lives and who knows all things. He knows us better than we know ourselves, and yet is willing to accept us for his sake. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.