

## WHAT IS JESUS ASKING?

What is Jesus asking of us? What does Jesus really want of us? What does it mean for me to be a follower? I mean, with my personality, in my situation and circumstances – what is Jesus really asking?

This is the real question for real Christians. People flirting out on the fringe of faith have very different questions: Is there a God? Was Jesus really the Son of God? Is there really any purpose to life? Was Jonah really swallowed by a whale? Was Jesus really born of a virgin? Is the Bible really the Word of God? Were Adam and Eve ever truly naked and unashamed? Will anyone ever be again?

These are important questions, and everybody asks them, sooner or later, if they start to wonder or awaken to the spiritual life. But they are also avoidance questions. That is, you can ponder and read and do research, and even answer all of these questions to your own satisfaction within the present limits of human knowing, and two things will be true: One, you will have spent a lot of time and energy. Two, it will have made absolutely no difference in your life. None of these questions, or their answers, have the slightest impact or the slightest effect on how you live, what you live for, how you make your decisions, or how you behave.

Don't lynch me just yet. I think it is important to wrestle with these questions. I do not think anybody gets very far into the Christian Life without trying to deal with them. To some degree, we are dealing with these questions, or their cousins, all of our lives. But by themselves, they have no significance. The real question behind all these outer questions is: *Can we trust God?* I call them avoidance questions because lots of people get stuck going round and round on these peripheral questions and never commit themselves to anything. And while it is true that commitment is scary, without it nothing happens. You can talk and think and read and worry all you want about whether you should marry her, or somebody else. But the truth is, if you never make the commitment to somebody, you never get to experience marriage. Am I misstating it? Is it any different with God? We cannot taste or experience the Kingdom from the outside looking in.

If the Bible is in some real way the Word of God ... if God really does exist ... if Jesus really is the Messiah sent by God – that is, if we really

come to think so – then we are faced with the choice – the possibility – of putting our trust in this God, and in the Son he sent to us. At that moment, for the first time, there is impact. A human can *believe* in God sincerely and for years, yet it will not make the slightest difference to anything. But if a human puts even the slightest *trust* in God, everything starts to change. Faith is not belief. Faith is trust. (Matthew 17:20) (For you theology hawks, Abraham did not put his belief in God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Abraham put his *trust* in God. (Genesis 15:6) Trust means that to the best of his ability, he will obey.) Jesus teaches that if we have trust (faith) as tiny as a tiny mustard seed, nothing will be impossible to us. If you think He is talking about belief – intellectual opinion – that makes no sense. A tiny piece of intellectual opinion does not get us very far. But if Jesus is talking about putting our *trust* in God, that is indeed the greatest dynamic of change and transformation in the universe.

That is, of course, the core of our problem with Jesus. He is not about belief – He is about trust. In encounter with Jesus, we get freed on the inside. That is what trust in God does to us. Our world never crucifies people for setting up soup kitchens. Oh, you can get killed for attacking tyrants, and anybody can get into more and more trouble by going against the laws of the society in which they live. But why would a society suspend all its own rules and track down a person who has not broken any of them – why would they hound and hate and finally crucify Him? You do not get that kind of frightened rage and utter animosity when somebody tries to help people on the outside. You only get that kind of reaction when somebody begins to free people on the inside. People free on the inside will not only walk out of all bondage, they will convert the Empire – and without hardly knowing they are doing it. The way they start living does it. Jesus is about transformation of life, not about maintenance. Why are so many of His followers about maintenance, and *not* about the transformation of life?

The Christian Faith is not the Christian Fact. But in our day and time, since words wobble, we should be thinking of it as the Christian Trust. I want you to think about your spouse – if you have one, or want one. Now, “spouse” is a frowsy word, unlovely for the meaning it is intended to carry. So I will switch to “wife,” and some of you will translate “husband.” You can get really clear about the three levels of faith if you think about your wife or husband instead of God – and then when it is clear, translate back to God again.

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FIRST LEVEL: You can *believe* – all you want and as hard as you can – that your wife exists, and it will not make any difference to anything. Of course, if she does not exist, that does withdraw a lot of possibilities.

SECOND LEVEL: If, having concluded that your wife exists, you also *trust* her, that starts having huge impact on your life. You will make all kinds of decisions and choices based on that trust – and your life will be very different as a result of that trust.

THIRD LEVEL: Trust, however, can go a lot of ways. Our trust in gravity allows us to use it, but the same trust causes us to avoid walking over cliffs. Switching back to your wife (and don't forget about the cliff): Suppose you not only trust her, but you trust – not just believe, *trust* – that *she loves you!* Now, you see, we are on an entirely different plane. Such trust would cause some of you to have a hard time sitting through the rest of this service. (“Blankets, or no blankets – Hallelujah!”)

Back to God. In much the same way, trusting in God's personal love for you is light years beyond mere belief in the existence of God. Trust changes everything! Why do some people with really rotten theology live such good lives? They got to the trust level. They maybe don't know how they got there, or they don't explain it very well, or they have a lot of superstition and misinformation mixed in with their thought patterns (unlike any of us, of course), but they trust God's love for them, so the peace and power and obedience and devotion are all operating despite their flawed theories. Would you rather have nice, neat theories, or a terrific life? (In our day and time, that question is not as easy to answer as it ought to be.)

Over the years, a number of my colleagues have complained about what they call my “*pietistic*” approach to religion. They have wanted me to convince my congregation to march on Washington, and all they see me doing is trying to convince my people to pray and study the Bible. (There is a lot more, but that is all they see.) They think marching on Washington is really *doing* something, and I do not. And I think praying and studying the Bible is really *doing* something, and they do not. Part of it is that they want to tell their people what they *should* be doing, and I want the Holy Spirit to tell my people about all the amazing possibilities available and waiting for them.

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But they say to me, “Well, that’s pretty safe. You can duck every issue. Just tell your people to pray, and they can pray and pray and nothing ever happens ...” “Well,” I reply, “it probably looks that way to you. So why am I working eighty-five hours a week (this was in former days, you understand); why am I always in trouble; why am I always having a wonderful and exciting life, with a church full of Life, and people changing, and amazing things happening – while your church is so boring and dull that you can’t think of anything better to do than go march on Washington? So you get your name in the newspaper – but a week later, who remembers? And then when you come home, what do you come home to?” (Right – a church so boring and dull that you have to start looking for something else to go march on.)

Is that really what Jesus expects of us? Marching on Washington? I am using that phrase to represent all such approaches to life, of course. There is, you know, a false piety that really *does* match what my jaundiced friends are imagining. Can you really pray forever and nothing will happen? Absolutely. You can pray *believing*, and nothing will ever happen. But if you pray *trusting*, watch out for the mushroom clouds! As Jesus put it, the mountains will start jumping into the sea.

Let me try one more analogy. Suppose you have a really good job – an exciting one – one you think is really important. On top of that, you have a really good boss – one you admire and respect – and one who seems to value and appreciate you too.

Okay, so the company is working on a really big project, and your boss has to take a business trip. Your boss gives you written instructions about what to do while he is away. You go over them and they seem clear enough, and you are both in agreement about what needs to happen. So the boss goes away.

A few days later, however, life starts happening. Things come up you did not expect. Some things are easier than you thought, and they are already accomplished. Other things have proven more complicated than they looked. Some of the supplies didn’t arrive as promised, and there are personnel problems you didn’t foresee. In short, the written instructions are still clear and good in general, but they do not cover a lot of new details that require your decisions.

### QUESTIONS

- 1.) Do you follow the written instructions exactly as they were written, do nothing where they do not instruct it, and wait for the boss to return? (Welcome to Fundamentalism ... and waiting for the “Second Coming.”)
- 2.) Do you remember to *think* about what the project is really about, and then use your own creativity and initiative to imagine what the boss would really like to see happen, altering the instructions to match present circumstances and hoping the boss will approve when/if he ever returns? (Welcome to Liberalism ... and not really caring *if* He returns, because you are doing it your own way now.)

OR

- 3.) Do you remember that the boss has not really gone “away”? He has a cell phone; you have a cell phone. So you call your boss on a daily basis, discuss what is happening, describe the ever-changing situation as clearly as you can, and come to a mutual understanding on how best to proceed. (Welcome to Christianity. It is necessary for us, as Christians, to pray every day ... )

The written instructions, of course, save a lot of time and confusion. You do not have to start every conversation from ground zero. But neither do you start thinking that the written instructions are more important than the boss.

The BOSS is not away! You can go ask. That is the dynamic reality of the living presence of the Holy Spirit that thousands of well-intentioned Christians are missing. They try to pray *believing*, and there is no connection. To get a connection, we have to pray *trusting*. Trust is not theory, it is obedience.

What is Jesus asking? We have classic, instruction-book answers. They are important, good, true answers. I am grateful that I don't have to wake up every morning and start out asking if there is a God. I already did my time with that one. I have young friends who are doing their time with it now. It is necessary and appropriate for them. I have some older friends who had put it off in their early years, so they are wrestling with it now. And some of them get annoyed with me because I don't want to commiserate very much with their doubts. I know the doubts are big when you still have them, but that was a lot of years ago

for me. Some want to think that maybe I skipped the really big doubts. I just laugh: “You’re trying to tell an old woods guide that he doesn’t know the terrain?” There are doubts all along the Path, and I have doubts newcomers have never even imagined. But none of them have to do with the existence of God. None of them have to do with whether Jesus is the true Messiah. The fun and excitement of the Christian Life come *after* we get past the avoidance questions. The good stuff is not found in trying to decide what we believe; the good stuff comes *after* we decide to trust Him. A lot of Christendom does not seem to know this.

What is Jesus asking? We have classic, instruction-book answers. They help a lot. They lay great foundations. “*Lose your life for my sake and you will find it.... Take up your cross and follow me.... Love each other as I have loved you.... Keep my commandments.... Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*” There are no words to describe how meaningful and important these teachings are to me, or how much I trust them. But sometimes a friend is sick, or a child is in trouble, or the church is limping because too many people have gotten careless about getting their covenants and pledges in. I am not always sure then what the instructions are telling me. How much money do I give to a friend, or to my children? Am I making folk strong, or weak? Am I calling people to their true destiny, or just spreading honey over everything so people will like me? (“You are the sugar of the earth.”) Some of you know the answers to all these questions without even praying – or at least you *seem* to know what **I** should be doing, even if you cannot figure out what *you* should be doing. But the instructions do not do it for me, not all by themselves. I have to keep calling in. Without the Boss’s presence, I would be bereft.

What is Jesus asking? That we follow Him. That we live the Life ourselves, and share it with others. If *anything* about God revealing himself in Christ Jesus is really true, it is that we do not have to be all uptight about it. We do not have to try to push it onto anybody who does not want it. Give people some time and some room. They will come to it if they seek it. Whatever they call it, however they get to it, they will come to it. What else IS there? The problem is not that people do not want God in their lives. The problem is that there are so many in darkness, loneliness, lostness – discouraged, hopeless, and hurting. Don’t ever fight about who’s got the good stuff. Help the people in darkness. Never be jealous about Light. You do not have to protect or defend Jesus.

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He can take care of Himself a whole lot better than you can. Invite ... offer ... sow seeds ... keep looking for the people who want it – the people who are hungry for it – not for the people you *think* need it. And never try to put it on the people you wish would get it because you think that would make life easier for *you*.

What does Jesus expect of us? That is a wonderful question which should lead us into endless dimensions of wonder and adventure. It should have us springing out of bed in the morning with delight in every new day – and who we get to spend it with. Unless, of course, we stayed up too late because we hated to close down yesterday because it was so much fun. Jesus *does* send His followers out – into every new day. No question about that. But there are things the instruction book does not know. It does not know your identity, your personal circumstances, your gifts and abilities, who you love, and what you personally fear, avoid, run from. But the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ *does* know all these things. Trust is the connection. And if, having trusted, you find life in His presence good, tell others you really care about – when you think they are interested. Don't force. Don't push. Don't work at it. Just invite ... offer ... sow seeds. Don't use nets; fly-fish. You do not have to *make* anything happen. You do not have to sell anything. God is not going away. Jesus will not evaporate. And when Jesus sends somebody across your path, don't wobble. Don't minimize or apologize or suddenly develop laryngitis. Trust is wonderful. Let it be what it really is.