

ANSWERING LIFE'S MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION (Matthew 27:11-26)

Every day, you and I face the task of answering questions, and some questions are hard to answer.

- If I go to store to buy groceries and don't my own bags with me, I will be asked, "Paper or plastic?" I'm not sure how to answer. Am I more concerned about the plastic that's going to sit in a landfill and not decompose, or am I more concerned about the overharvesting of trees to make consumable paper products? Which is the more environmentally friendly response?
- If I go to a fast-food restaurant and order a burger, I may be asked, "Do you want fries with that?" How do I answer? Sure, I want fries with that, but do I need to have fries with that? That's a different question that elicits a different answer.
- If I am stopped by a policeman or highway patrol officer, and he asks, "Do you know how fast you were going?", how should I answer? Should I say, "Yes sir, I was going 15 mph over the speed limit. Is there anything else you want to know?" Or should I play dumb? "Why, I have no idea, officer."

Most of the big questions in life are the one's we ask ourselves? Am I going to get married? Who should I marry? When should I get married? Am I going to go to college? Where am I going to go to college? What am I going to study in college? What do I want to be when I grow up? Do I really want to grow up? Those are all important questions.

The Bible is full of questions. The first question found in the Bible was not asked by Adam or Eve, nor was it asked by God. The first question was asked by the Deceiver. He asked, "Did God really say you shall not eat of any tree in the Garden?" Satan was planting a seed of doubt or distrust into the heart of Eve. As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that he wants to get her and Adam to think that God is holding out on them.

The next question in the Bible was asked by God. God called out to Adam, "Where are you?" Do you really think that God was requesting information of which He was not aware? God knew exactly where Adam was, but He wanted Adam to admit to God and to himself what he was doing. In fact, the next two things God says are both questions: "Who told you that you are naked" and "Have you eaten of the tree which I commanded you not to eat?"

How did Adam answer? He stood tall and replied, "It's that woman you gave me . . ." Adam, expertly, blamed two people for his sin. It was the fault of the woman and the fault of God for giving Him the woman.

While the OT begins with God asking where man is, the NT begins with men asking where God is. We looked at this last Sunday morning. Whether they realized it or not, when the Wise Men arrived in Jerusalem and started asking, "Where is he who has born King of the Jews?" they were asking, "Where is God?"

These were important questions. This morning, we are going to return to our journey

through gospel of Matthew. As we do, we are going to concern ourselves with, “Answering Life’s Most Important Question.” He didn’t realize it, but Pilate, the Governor of Judea asked life’s MIQ. Let’s read the story. It is found in Matthew 27:11-26.

Life’s MIQ is found in v. 22. There is no more important question than that. I want you to notice four truths.

You Must Answer Life’s Most Important Question for Yourself

This is something Pilate attempted not to do. He tried to get someone else to make this decision for him. The Gospel of Luke tells us something that Matthew, Mark, and John did not include in their accounts of the ministry of Jesus. Luke reveals that Jesus was brought to Pilate on two different occasions. During the first visit, after learning that Jesus was from Galilee, Pilate sent Jesus to King Herod. Herod had jurisdiction over Galilee, and he happened to be in Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Pilate decided to let Herod interrogate Jesus and decide what to do with Him. During His meeting with Herod, Jesus wouldn’t answer any of Herod’s questions; so, Herod lost interest and sent Jesus back to Pilate. Pilate was left with the unenviable task of determining what to do with Jesus.

Still today, there are many who don’t want to take personal responsibility for spiritual matters. Instead of making a personal commitment to Christ, they hope to make it to heaven on the coattails of someone else. They are banking on the religious faith of their parents or grandparents. Let me assure you, there is no group plan to get into heaven. You can’t make it to heaven on the basis of someone else’s faith. Heaven is either gained or lost by what you decide to do with Jesus.

To Pilate’s credit, he wanted to let Jesus go free. In his heart, he knew that Jesus was innocent, but he left the decision up to the crowd. To be certain, Pilate was the one who had the authority to condemn Jesus or to free Jesus. The religious authorities had no authority to do that; the angry mob was powerless to order Jesus’ death. It was up to Pilate alone, but he let the crowd decide for him.

It is worth noting that Pilate attempted to get the crowd to do the just thing. He placed before them two men: one was a political revolutionary and murderer, the kind of man you would not want to bring home to meet Mom and Dad, and the other was a teacher and miracle worker.

According to some manuscripts of Matthew’s gospel, both men bore the name Jesus. It was a common name in the first century, Jewish world. It corresponds with the Hebrew name Joshua. Pilate set before the crowd Jesus Barabbas and Jesus, the Messiah. Look at v. 17. Pilate is basically asking, “Do you want Jesus the notorious insurrectionist or Jesus the note-worthy miracle worker?” I think Pilate expected and wanted the crowd to choose Jesus of Nazareth. To their shame, the people chose the man of violence instead of the man of love. To his shame, Pilate let the people’s choice stand.

Don’t let the crowd determine what you will do with Jesus. Far too many make that mistake.

I used to pastor in a university town. On Dad's Weekend or Mom's Weekend, some students would come to church with their parents, but if those same students didn't have friends who attended church, then they weren't in church when their parents weren't in town. They let their friends determine the level of their devotion to the things of God.

Of all the amazing creatures in this world, the ones that fascinate me the most are the chameleons, the ones that have the incredible ability to change their coloring so as to match their surroundings. If they are amongst greenery, they match the very hue of the green around them. If the ground around them is a drab brown and tan, they blend in perfectly. I saw video of someone place a series of eye-glasses with different colored frames in front of a chameleon. It took just seconds for the chameleon to change to blue, red, black, whatever the color of the frame was. The clip ends with the chameleon laying across three different frames, and the chameleon is now segmented into three different colors with each matching the color of the frame closest to him.

Chameleons are amazing creatures, but don't live your life as a chameleon Christian who simply matches the level of devotion of the friend group you are around at any given moment. Instead of making it your goal to blend in, make it your goal to stand out from the crowd. If you are going to stand for Christ you are going to stand contrary to the values and behavior of those who are not Christ-followers. Jesus calls us to be light, and light always opposes darkness. Light can't blend in with darkness.

We come to a second truth about answering life MIQ.

You Can't Avoid Answering Life's Most Important Question

Pilate did everything he could to avoid and evade making a decision concerning the fate of Jesus. As we mentioned earlier, Pilate first tried to pawn the decision off onto Herod. When that didn't work, he got the crowd to make the decision. Look at v. 24. Basically, Pilate was saying, "I don't want any part in this whole affair." Pilate washed his hands, but he didn't succeed in erasing the blood stains from them. By doing nothing, he was complicit, he was guilty in sending Jesus to the cross.

When it comes to taking a stand for or against Jesus, neutrality is not an option. Jesus Himself said, "He who is not with Me is against Me."

The religious race is a two-part system; you can't be an Independent. You can't sit on the fence. The line is too narrow to walk. If you are not a whole-hearted follower of Jesus, you are a member of the opposition. To decide not to decide is to decide against Christ.

The great baseball theologian Yogi Berra once said, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." Well, that is not exactly helpful advice. Maybe Dr. Seuss had that in mind when he wrote the following poem:

Did I ever tell you about the young Zode
Who came to two signs at a fork in the road,

And one said “Place 1” and the other “Place 2”?
So, the Zode had to make up his mind what to do.

Well, the Zode scratched his head, and his chin, and his pants,
And he said to himself, “Now, I’ll be taking a chance
If I go to Place 1. Now, that place may be too hot,
So how do I know if I’ll like it or not?”

On the other hand, though, I’ll feel such a fool
If I go to Place 2 and I find it’s too cool.
In that case, I make catch a chill and turn blue,
So, Place 1 may be the best place not Place 2.

One the other hand though, if Place 1 is too high
I may get a terrible ear ache and die.
On the other hand, though, what might happen to me
If I go to Place 2 and I find it’s too low.
I could get some terribly strange pain in my toe.
So, Place 1 may be the best.

And he started to go and stopped and he said,
“On the other hand though,
On the other hand, other hand, other hand though ...”
And for 36 hours and one-half, that Zode
Made starts and made stops at the fork in the road
Saying, “No don’t take a chance, you may not be right.”
And he had an idea that was wonderfully bright.
“Play safe!” cried the Zode. “I’ll play safe; I’m no Dunce.
“I’ll simply start off to both places at once.”

And that’s how the Zode who would not take a chance
Got to no place at all with a split in his pants.

At best, indecision is an embarrassing thing. At worst, indecision is a fatal thing. What you choose to do with Christ is a critical fork in the road. You have to make a decision regarding what you will do with Christ. You can’t put that decision off forever. To try to play it safe by not doing anything is the most dangerous thing you could possibly do. The safest thing to do is to turn the steering wheel of your life over to the Lord and let Him take control of your life. To borrow from the Oklahoma-born singer Carrie Underwood, we would do well to pray, “Jesus, take the wheel.” But don’t wait until your life is spinning out of control. Do it now.

You Must Choose Carefully Which Voice You Heed

Pilate heard a number of competing voices that were vying for his attention and action

on its behalf.

The voice of conscience urged, “Take a stand for justice.” Pilate knew Jesus was not guilty. He knew the Jewish religious leaders were jealous of Jesus’ popularity. They viewed Him as a threat and wanted to get rid of Him. The voice of conscience told him, “Be bold! Free this man!”

There was, however, **the voice of the crowd that** demanded to be heard. They kept on chanting, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” The crowd was becoming a mob

Then, **the voice of compromise** called out, “Don’t do anything rash. Appease the crowd. Sure, you know Jesus isn’t guilty of any crime, but have Him scourged—brutally whipped. That will quench their thirst for blood.”

The crowd made it clear they would not be so easily pleased. They wouldn’t settle for Jesus only being whipped. They wanted Him dead. That is when **the voice of career** warned, “If you don’t give in to the crowd, you will have a riot on your hands. Word will get to the Emperor. He won’t be pleased. You will be out of a job or worse. Don’t sacrifice your political future for this poor, unfortunate, Jewish Rabbi. Order His crucifixion, and be done with it.”

What did Pilate do? He let the voices of the crowd, compromise, and career drown out the voice of conscience. He failed and refused to take a stand for what he knew was the right thing to do.

All of us have a conscience. It is that inner voice that distinguished between right and wrong. It calls upon us to do the right thing and tried to steer us away from the wrong course of action.

I heard about a 6-year-old boy who was asked what the conscience is. He answered, “I’m not sure, but I think it has something to do with feeling bad when I kick girls.”

When you violate the voice of your conscience, you may feel dirty, guilty, remorseful. You will undoubtedly sacrifice some of your self-respect when you choose to heed the wrong voice. But be warned, each time you turn a deaf ear to the voice of conscience, his voice gets a little less loud until he no longer accuses you. The Bible calls it a seared conscience. It has been wounded repeatedly to the point that it has lost all feeling. It is no longer bothered by wrong-doing.

Everywhere I go, I wear shoes; so, if I walk outside without shoes, I feel every pebble, every blade of grass. In Boy Scout terms, I’m a tender-foot. Lance on the other hand, he can walk barefooted across our chipped and cracked church parking without any discomfort whatsoever.

That’s great when you are talking about feet. It is terrible when you are talking about the conscience. You want to keep your conscience tender and soft, clear and clean.

The very same voices that Pilate heard, you, too, will hear. You will encounter **the voice of compromise** saying, “Don’t be a fanatic. It’s OK to go to church every now and then, but don’t let it control your life.”

The voice of the crowd will cry out, “The Bible is an ancient book, but we live in modern times. You don’t have to follow all of its rules and regulations. As long as you don’t hurt anybody else, you can do whatever you want to do.”

The voice of career longs to be heard. It says, particularly to young people, “You

have too much to do right now to make church a priority. Just wait until things slow down a bit. Right now, you need to concentrate on making a living and taking care of your family. You can get involved in church later, when you have the time.”

But if you will dare to be honest with yourself, and if you will listen closely, you can hear **the voice of conscience** saying, “Now is the time to settle this matter of what to do with Christ. You know He is real; you know He is the Son of God; you know that He died on a cross to pay for the penalty of sin; you know that arose from the grave. You know you should receive Him as Savior and as Lord. Do it now.”

I believe that God often chooses to speak to us through our conscience. If you will keep your conscience clear and tender, when you hear your conscience speaking, you may be hearing the voice of God. As you hear Him, obey Him.

We will look at one final truth that is involved in answering life’s MIQ.

You Will Be Responsible for How You Answer

Pilate sought to deny any and all responsibility for His order that sent Jesus to the cross. He said, “It’s not my fault,” and he washed his hands.

One person observed, “It wasn’t his hands that were dirty; it was his heart.” No amount of soap and water can cleanse a sin-stained heart.”

I think we are all like Pilate in that we attempt to excuse ourselves for our own sin. We can come up with all sorts of reasons to rationalize and explain away the wrong things we do. Some say they are the products of a dysfunctional family. Other were brought up in a disadvantaged home with too little money and too few breaks in life. All of us can come up with a reason or a person to blame for our mistakes and misdeeds.

All of these excuses, no matter how earnestly delivered, are seen to be empty when held up to the light of reality. In the end, we are responsible for the decisions we make.

We have to keep in mind that what took place in Matthew 27 is all part of the day we call “Good Friday.” On its surface, this day appeared to be anything but good. It was a day of suffering, a day of death, a day of incomparable loss. At the time, none of the disciples would have thought of this day as a good day. At the time, they did not realize that Easter was coming.

We have been living through 2020. No one would think of this as a good year. We are hoping that 2021 will be a better year, whatever that means.

I wish to close with a portion of a devotion written by Carolyn Arends. She is a contemporary Christian singer. Listen to what she wrote:

A couple years ago, during a jubilant Easter service, our pastor said something that stopped me in my mental tracks: “The world offers promises full of emptiness. But Easter offers emptiness full of promise.”

Empty cross, empty tomb, empty grave-clothes ... all full of promise. If I were writing the Easter story, I don’t think I’d choose emptiness as my symbolic gesture. But then, I also wouldn’t be talking about strength being made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), foolish things confounding the wise (1 Corinthians

1:27), the meek inheriting the earth (Matthew 5:5), or the poor in spirit getting (in every sense of the word *get*) the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3). And I certainly wouldn't be talking about dying in order to live.

What is it about God that makes him so favor this kind of paradox? I guess this is what we should expect from the Servant King—the God who decided that the best way to save the world was to let it kill him. I don't understand the way God thinks. But on those days when I feel hollowed out and broken—half-dead, even—it makes me glad to remember that for Easter people, even death is full of promise.

The world makes a lot of promises. Smoke and mirrors, mostly. Frantic, cartoonish attempts to distract us from the gaping holes in the middle of our souls (or to sell us the latest product in order to fill them). There's no life in those promises.

So, I'm hoping that [this year] I'll be a little more willing to die to that stuff. I'm praying I'll become more aware of the empty space within, and that I'll resist the urge to fill it with any old thing I can find. I'm going to wait, carved out, vulnerable, a cracked and crumbling jar of clay, on a life God's offered to deposit anywhere there's room. I'm going to believe that if I'll just leave my empty spaces empty, he'll fill them. That, I'm convinced, is a reasonable expectation.

Friends, my counsel to you, as we begin 2021, is let your empty places and empty spaces remain empty, and let God fill them as He sees fit and when He sees fit.