

God Questions: Jesus' Answers to Seven Big Questions

This series explores seven significant questions that people ask about God and about the meaning of their lives, and answers those questions from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Although this series can be preached at any time of the year, it's especially well-suited for the seven Sundays of Lent through Easter.

NOTE: Much of the content of this series comes from Martin's book, What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian? A Guide to What Matters Most.

1. Who Is Jesus? (Matthew 16:13-18)
2. Am I Accepted? (John 8:1-11, Matthew 9:9-13)
3. Where Is God? (John 1:14, Matthew 25:37-40)
4. What Matters Most? (Mark 12:28-34)
5. What Brings Fulfillment? (Proverbs 11:25, John 13:1-17)
6. What About Suffering? (Matthew 27:27-31, 41-46)
7. Is There Hope? (Matthew 28:1-7)

NOTE: In some of these sermons you will see projection notes that I sent to our media team. Since some of the sermons did not need projection, we did not use it.

God Questions: Jesus' Answers to Seven Big Questions

Part 1 - Who Is Jesus?

Matthew 16:13-18

Years ago I met a young man named Danny. When I first met him, he said, “Preacher, you need to know that I’m an atheist. I don’t believe the Bible. I don’t like organized religion. And I can’t stand self-righteous, judgmental Christians.” In spite of Danny’s avowed atheism and my devout Christian beliefs, we became close friends. For a guy who claimed to be an atheist, all he ever wanted to talk about was God, religion, and faith. As the months progressed, Danny softened his stance on atheism. One day, after a long conversation, he announced with a laugh, “I’ve decided to upgrade from an atheist to an agnostic.” Several months later Danny said, “I’ve had an epiphany. I realize that I don’t reject Christianity. Instead, I reject the way that intolerant Christians package Christianity.” A few weeks after that conversation, Danny said, “Martin, you’ve just about convinced me on this religion stuff. So I want to know—what’s the least I can believe and still be a Christian?” I was so impressed with that question that I wrote a book about it. I’ll be using a portion of that book for this new series.

So what is the least we can believe and still be a Christian? The answer to that question is Jesus. Christians can discard a lot of non-essential religious beliefs, but we can’t discard Jesus. But that raises another important question. Who is Jesus? Which version of Jesus, and there are many, is there an accurate one? A couple of years ago, on the recommendation of a close pastor friend, I watched a movie that raised that question. The movie is called *Talladega Nights*. **[Slide: cover of DVD]** Please know that I do not recommend this movie. It’s silly and it’s crude—about what you would expect from a Will Ferrell movie. But there is a religious scene in the movie that raises important theological questions about the identity of Jesus Christ.

In this scene, NASCAR racer Ricky Bobby, along with his family and best friend Cal, gather for a dinner of Domino’s Pizza, KFC, and Taco Bell. Before they eat, Ricky offers grace. He begins his prayer, “Dear Lord Baby Jesus.” He then proceeds to thank baby Jesus for various blessings, including his “red hot smoking wife Carly.” As he prays, he continues to repeat the phrase, “Dear Lord Baby Jesus.” His wife Carly interrupts him and says, “You know sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don’t always have to call him baby.” Ricky Bobby replies, “I like the

Christmas Jesus best, and I'm saying grace. When you say grace, you can say it to grown-up Jesus, or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus, or whoever you want."

Ricky Bobby continues his prayer, "Dear tiny Jesus, in your golden fleece diapers, with your tiny balled up fists." His father-in-law angrily interrupts, "He was a man. He had a beard!" Ricky Bobby snaps back, "Listen, I'm saying grace, and I like the Christmas version best!" Ignoring the conflict between the two men, Ricky Bobby's best friend Cal says, "I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo T-shirt. It says like, I want to be formal, but I'm here to party too." One of Ricky Bobby's sons says, "I like to picture Jesus as a Ninja, fighting off the evil samurai." Cal then adds, "I like to think of Jesus with giant eagle wings and singing lead vocals for Leonard Skinner with an angel band."

Ricky Bobby returns to his prayer, saying, "Dear eight-pound, six-ounce, newborn infant Jesus, who doesn't even know a word yet—little infant, so cuddly but still omnipotent." He then thanks baby Jesus for all his NASCAR victories and the millions in prize money he has won. He concludes grace by saying, "Thank you for all your power and grace dear Baby God, Amen." Immediately after the prayer, Cal says, "That was a heck of a grace, man! You nailed that like a split hog!" ***[Note: If you have video capability, it's possible to show this scene—carefully edited. I've done so at two churches. One loved it. The other hated it and it created problems for me. So you will need to use careful pastoral judgment about showing an edited version, because some people and churches will accept and appreciate it, and others will find it offensive. If you are not sure, I would suggest you just verbally tell about the scene, as I have done above, which is not particularly controversial.]***

Count on Hollywood to raise important religious issues in such an irreverent yet hilarious way. That scene in *Talladega Nights*, irreverent as it is, raises major theological questions. Who is Jesus? Which version of Jesus is accurate? The "baby Jesus" Christmas version? The "Tuxedo Tee Shirt" party version? The "Ninja" warrior version? The "lead singer" Rock Star version? Which version of Jesus is the right one? It's imperative that every person have a clear understanding of who Jesus is, for much is at stake.

From the first century until today, speculation and debate have swirled around Jesus of Nazareth. ***[Slide: image of Jesus]*** People hold divergent and conflicting views about his

identity. That was certainly true in Jesus' day. For example, the 7th chapter of John tells a story about Jesus going to Jerusalem for a religious festival. By then, Jesus had become quite a celebrity. The whole city was abuzz about this amazing miracle worker and teacher from Nazareth. However, no consensus had emerged concerning his identity. Some people at the festival said, **[add to slide: "He is a good man" (John 7:12)]**. Others said, **[same picture, change words to: No, he is deceiving the crowd" (John 7:12)]**. Still others thought Jesus was an insightful teacher. They said, **[same picture, change words to: "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" (John 7:15)]**. A few believed Jesus was deranged. They said to him, **[same picture, change words to: "You have a demon!" (John 7:20)]**. Others asked, **[same picture, change words to: "Can it be that this is the Messiah?" (John 7:26)]**. Electricity filled the air. People wanted to know, who is this Jesus? Is he a good man, a deceitful threat, a wise teacher, a deranged lunatic—or, is he perhaps the long awaited Messiah? Who is this man? **[END SLIDE]**

All of which brings us to today's text. Matthew 16 vividly raises the question of Jesus' identity. In this story, Jesus asked his disciples, **[slide: same image of Jesus as before, with these words: "Who do people say that I am?"]** After the disciples answered his question, Jesus asked them a second, more important question. He said to them, **[same picture, change words to: "Who do you say that I am?"]**. In short, Jesus asked his disciples to make a verdict about his identity. You see, the most important question in life is not, "What career should I choose?" or "Whom should I marry?" or "Am I financially secure?" Instead, the most important question in life is, "Who is Jesus Christ to me?"

When Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responded, **[same image of Jesus, change words to: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." (Matthew 16)]** Peter's confession of faith is one of the most important Christological affirmations ever made. In a nutshell, Peter claims that Jesus is far more than a good man, a wise teacher, or even a prophet of God. Instead, Peter's confession is a profound affirmation of the divinity of Jesus—an affirmation Christians have made ever since. When we confess Jesus as "Christ," we affirm that Jesus is the Savior of humanity, liberating us from sin, death and hopelessness. When we confess Jesus as "Son of the Living God," we affirm that Jesus is uniquely related to God, that Jesus fully reveals the nature of God, and that Jesus connects us to God in a way no other person can. Therefore, when we, like Peter, affirm that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the Living God," we acknowledge that Jesus is worthy of our highest praise and ultimate loyalty. **[END SLIDE]**

At some point in their life, every person must grapple with the question of Jesus' identity. We cannot defer the question to our parents, our preacher, or anyone else. Ultimately, every person must answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" I answered that question many years ago. At the time I was a young, mixed-up and troubled teenager. I didn't understand everything about Jesus then and still don't. However, I knew enough about Jesus to know that I desperately needed him in my life. So, on a Sunday morning in a Baptist Church in Muskogee, Oklahoma, I affirmed my faith in Jesus Christ. The next Sunday morning I was baptized. It's the most important thing I've ever done—or ever will do—in my entire life. Along with the Apostle Peter, I believe that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God." I place my faith and trust in Jesus, accept his love, grace and forgiveness, and attempt to follow him as my Lord.

I still have plenty of questions about Jesus. And I've had my share of doubts about him. However, Jesus transformed my life and continues to do so. Jesus gives my life meaning, direction and purpose. Jesus gives me courage and strength for living. And, Jesus gives me hope for life and hope even for death. My faith in Jesus Christ is the most important part of my life. I hope the same is true for you. If you would like to have a conversation on this subject, I or another one of our clergy on staff here would be honored to visit with you.

A friend of mine once wrote a song about Jesus called, "*If He Was Just a Man.*" The words go like this: **[slide: same image of Jesus used during sermon]** "I've heard his name most all my life. They tell me he once healed a blind man's eyes. They tell me he walked on the sea. They tell me he gave his own life for me. But if I really told the truth, I'd say sometimes I've doubted just like you. But there's one thing I go back to. There's one question I'd like to ask you. If he was just a man, there is one thing I cannot understand. How could he change my life so, if he was just a man?"

And so, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter replied, **[add to slide: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."]** And that my friends—that is who Jesus is. **[END SLIDE]** (Note: We followed this sermon by reading "*One Solitary Life*," followed by a congregational song, "*Majesty*").

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God Questions: Jesus' Answers to Seven Big Questions Part 2 - Am I Accepted?

John 8:1-11, Matthew 9:9-13

Some of you have probably heard of an author named Anne Lamott. Ann wrote a best-selling book called *Traveling Mercies*. In that book, Ann shares her journey toward faith in Jesus Christ. Years ago Ann found herself broke, drunk, bulimic, depressed, and addicted to drugs. She said, "I could no longer imagine how God could love me." Desperate, Ann set an appointment with an Episcopal priest. She told him she was so messed up she didn't think God could love her. The priest replied, "God has to love you. That's God's job." Ann's priest was absolutely right. God works full-time offering unconditional love to all human beings. God's affirming and forgiving love, what theologians call grace, is God's best gift to humanity. Grace means that in spite of all our flaws, failures, and sins, God dearly loves us and offers us forgiveness.

We see God's grace lived out dramatically in the life of Jesus. Rather than judge people, Jesus loved and accepted them. We see a vivid example of this in today's text from John 8. In this story a woman is caught in the act of adultery. Religious authorities brought her to Jesus, demanding that she be stoned to death, in accordance with Jewish law. Jesus said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." One by one they left the scene, leaving their stones behind. Jesus said, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you"

The Bible contains numerous stories about Jesus spending time with and offering grace to flawed people including adulterers, prostitutes, tax collectors, and other sinners. That's certainly the case in our other text today in Matthew 9. In this story, Jesus was hanging out with all kinds of sinful people. The Pharisees, a group of self-righteous, judgmental religious leaders vigorously complained about that. Jesus responded to them by saying, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Matthew 9: 10-13)

At his core, Jesus was a man of mercy and grace. He consistently loved, accepted, and welcomed imperfect sinful people into God's family. It's not that Jesus approved of sinful behavior—not at all. For example, when Jesus offered forgiveness and grace to that woman caught in adultery in John 8, he told her, "Go and sin no more." Jesus did not condone sinfulness. He did not lay aside the Ten Commandments. But Jesus loved sinners, accepted them, and welcomed them as they were. In spite of their sin, Jesus refused to judge and condemn them. Instead, Jesus saw them as beloved children of God, created in the image of God, with great value and worth. Obviously Jesus hoped they would change for the better. He wanted them to grow in morality and purity. But even with their flaws, Jesus warmly welcomed sinners and offered them forgiveness, love, and acceptance. In short, Jesus offered them grace. He does the same for you and me.

The question we are exploring today is, "Am I Accepted?" The wonderful Gospel answer is yes. God accepts us in spite of all our flaws. God forgives us. God loves us as his beloved children. We are currently in the season of Lent. During this season God calls us to be honest about our sinfulness, repent from our sin, and find forgiveness. The fact is that you and I blow it all the time. But the great Gospel news is that God offers us grace.

My favorite story about God's grace comes from Tony Campolo, a well-known author and speaker. I heard him tell this story at a conference in Honolulu. Many of us have probably heard this story before; it's become quite famous. However, even if you're familiar with Tony's story, it's worth retelling. Years ago, Tony traveled to Honolulu, Hawaii, to speak at a conference. Upon arriving, Tony went to his hotel and fell asleep. He woke at 9:00 a.m. his time but in Honolulu it was 3:00 a.m. Wide awake and hungry, Tony walked to a small diner near the hotel and ordered coffee and a doughnut. At 3:30 AM, a group of provocatively dressed prostitutes walked in the door. Their loud and crude talk made Tony uncomfortable, so he prepared to leave. But then he heard one of the women say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be thirty-nine." Her friend responded, "So what do you want from me, a birthday party? You want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday.'" "Come on!" said the woman. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When Tony heard those words, he made a decision. He stayed in the diner until the women left. Then he said to the owner, “Do they come in here every night?” “Yeah” he said, “You can set your clock by it.” Tony said, “What’s the name of the woman who sat next to me?” “That’s Agnes,” he replied. Tony said, “What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?” A smile crossed the owner’s face and he said, “That’s great! I like it! I’ll even make the cake.”

At 2:00 the next morning Tony went back to the diner. He put up crepe paper decorations and a big sign that said, “Happy Birthday, Agnes!” The workers at the diner obviously got the word out because by 3:15 just about every prostitute in Honolulu crowded into the place. At 3:30 sharp, the door swung open, and in came Agnes and her friends. Tony had the entire group scream, “Happy Birthday, Agnes!”

Agnes, absolutely stunned, felt so overwhelmed her friend had to hold her up. Everyone in the diner began to sing, “Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday dear Agnes, Happy birthday to you.” When they brought out the cake covered with thirty-nine candles, Agnes began to cry. Too overcome with emotion to blow out the candles, she let the owner of the diner blow them out for her. Before she cut the cake, Agnes hesitated. She asked if she could take her cake down the street, show it to her mother, and then come right back. The owner of the diner said that would be fine, so she did.

When the door closed behind Agnes, silence filled the diner. Tony broke the silence by saying, “What do you say we pray?” It probably seemed a strange thing for a roomful of prostitutes to bow their head in prayer, but that’s what happened. Tony prayed for Agnes and for the other prostitutes in the diner, affirming that they were beloved daughters of God with great value, worth, and promise. When Tony finished the prayer, the owner of the diner said, “You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?” In a moment of divine inspiration, Tony said, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.”

(We concluded the sermon by singing “Amazing Grace”).

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God Questions: Jesus' Answers to Seven Big Questions Part 3 - Where Is God?

John 1:14, Matthew 25:37-40

While shopping, a woman locked her keys in her car in a rough part of town. She found an old coat hanger lying on the street and tried to break in but with no success. Feeling desperate, she finally prayed, "Dear God, please send somebody to help me." Within five minutes an old rusty car pulled up. A rough-looking, tattooed, bearded man wearing a biker skull rag walked toward her. She thought, Great Scott! This is who God sent to help me? But she was desperate. So when the man asked if he could help, she said, "Can you help me break into my car?" He said, "Sure, I'm good at that." He took the coat hanger, walked over to her car and in thirty seconds flat opened the door. She hugged the man and said, "Thank you so much. You are a very nice man." He replied, "Lady, I'm not a nice man. I got out of prison just today. I served two years for auto theft and have only been out for about an hour." The woman hugged the man again and shouted, with great enthusiasm, "Thank you God, for sending me a professional!"

We are currently in a series called *God Questions*. Today's question is, "**Where is God?**" I don't pretend to have all the answers to the question, Where is God? God is bigger and more mysterious than any of us can comprehend. No doubt God works in the world in ways our puny minds cannot even begin to understand. But the Bible, and the life of Jesus, clearly teaches us that God primarily works through people. We see this truth throughout Scripture. God worked through Adam and Eve to name the animals and tend the garden. God worked through Sarah and Abraham to give birth to the Jewish nation. God worked through Moses to set the people of Israel free from slavery. God worked through King David to establish the nation of Israel. God spoke to the Israelites through the prophets. And, when God wanted to do God's most important work ever, God did so through a young woman named Mary who gave birth to Jesus Christ.

In perhaps the most important passage of the New Testament, the Bible says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The theological term for that is incarnation. It means "God became flesh." In short, the incarnation tells us that God actively engages in the world through human beings, especially through Jesus Christ. And Jesus' first order

of business was to call other people to join him in doing his work. And as the church, we continue to do Christ's work in the world today, as we in today's second text from Matthew 25. You and I are the heart and hands of Jesus in the world today. In short, we are God's instruments.

Several years ago, when I was serving in Lebanon, Tennessee, tornadoes ravaged the town of Lafayette, not far from us, destroying both property and lives. Two days after the tornadoes hit, a person from our congregation dropped by my office. He wanted to talk about the awful tragedy in Lafayette. During our conversation he said, "Pastor, when terrible things like this happen, where is God?" I said, "Come with me, and I'll show you where God is." I then took him to our Family Life Center, where people busily loaded supplies into a large truck. The day before, we sent out a congregation-wide message, asking our members to donate needed supplies for the Lafayette community. People came out of the woodwork, bringing food, blankets, clothes, diapers, baby formula, and bottled water. In fact, they brought an entire truckload of supplies. They also brought lots of money, and a good number of them volunteered their time and energy to personally help with relief efforts. I said to my church member, "You asked me, 'Where is God?' Well, God is right here, in the midst of all this food, clothing, diapers, baby formula, and bottled water."

The next day a group of men from a Nashville church showed up in tornado-ravaged Lafayette with chainsaws and pickup trucks. They spent the next three days cutting up fallen trees and hauling the debris away. A newspaper reporter interviewed one of the men with the chainsaws. Although this blue-collar construction worker did not have a seminary degree, I'd give him an A+ in theology. When the reporter asked him why he and his friends came to help, he said, "We want to be God with skin on."

As a pastor, I get to see God work through human instruments all the time, right here in our own church. **(At this point, it would be most effective for you to give examples of where you see God at work in the life of your church. The examples don't have to be big and impressive, but local examples will be the best.)** For example, every day of the week, God works through the staff and the volunteers at our inner city ministry called Harvest Hands, who make a big difference in a struggling Nashville neighborhood. Every year, our church builds a Habitat for Humanity house, dramatically changing the lives of those who receive the house. Throughout the winter, volunteers from our church provide food, shelter and friendship

to homeless people through our Room in the Inn ministry. Many of you work at 61st Avenue UMC as a tutor for at-risk children, making a difference in their lives. Others of you volunteer at Grace Works, doing God's work for struggling people in Williamson County. Hundreds of our members engage in overseas mission work every year in places like South Africa and Haiti and Mexico and Honduras. Every week, large numbers of our members write "Grace Notes" to people, encouraging them through notes of love and prayer. God works in exceptional ways through the youth of our church. For example, every week our youth volunteer at a homeless shelter in Nashville. Every year, a bunch of our youth volunteer at Camp Barnabus—spending the entire week caring for a severely disabled person. Every year our youth organize and put on a concert called "Rock the Change." The event raises awareness and money around the problem of human trafficking. On a regular basis, our youth are the hands and heart of Jesus for others. Every month volunteers from our church take the elements of Holy Communion to home bound members, reminding them that they are not forgotten. Every weekend, Trinity UMC, our campus at Spring Hill, provides food for poor children so they don't have to go hungry over the weekend. Every Sunday, our Andrew Ministers welcome our guests, living out Jesus' words, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Every week, volunteers in our church minister to people with dementia at our Sunny Day Club ministry. We even have a group of people here who provide valet parking on Sunday mornings so folks with physical limitations can still come and worship God at our church. And if time permitted I could go on and on and on.

And that's just one church in one town. That same dynamic is happening in powerful ways throughout the entire world. When people fight for justice on behalf of the oppressed and serve as advocates of the poor, God is at work. When the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, the sick cared for and the illiterate educated, God is at work. When leaders seek peace instead of war, when people fight to protect the environment, and when scientists discover new drugs to fight debilitating diseases, God is at work. When the gospel is shared all over the world and new churches are born, God is at work. When people from all over the world respond to natural disasters with love, compassion, and practical aid—God is at work. Where is God? God is alive and well and at work in the world through people just like you and me.

I saw this reality lived out a few weeks ago when I attended the dedication ceremony for our congregation's most recent Habitat for Humanity build. Seventy people showed up, all of whom had played a role in building and/or financing the house. During the ceremony the

woman receiving the home gave a brief thank-you speech. She said to the crowd, “God provided this home for my family and me. But God used all of you to make it happen.” Although she’s not a trained theologian, she understands well the theology of incarnation—God works in the world through human instruments.

Years ago Bruce Carroll wrote a song called, “*Who Will Be Jesus?*” In the song, Bruce tells stories about struggling people who desperately need the love, support, and encouragement of God. He concludes, “They do not need a judge they need a friend. Who will be Jesus to them?” When we are Jesus to people in need, when we offer them grace, love, compassion, support, and practical help, we are instruments of God’s incarnational work in the world.

So where is God? Jesus’ life and work and the life and work of the church teaches us that God is at work in the world incarnationally—through human instruments, including you and me. Imagine that!

###

God Questions: Jesus' Answers to Seven Big Questions Part 4 - What Matters Most?

Mark 12:28-34

We are currently in a series called “*God Questions?*” *Jesus' Answers to Seven Big Questions.*”

Today's question is “***What matters most?***” People answer that question very differently.

For example, if they were honest, some people would say finances are what matters most.

[Slide: image of finances like stock market ticker tape] They work hard to attain financial security. The problem is, finances are not very dependable. A crash in the market, a layoff, a business failure, a disability, a recession—any of these can wipe out our financial security. If finances are what matter most, we could be in real trouble. For other people, their job is what matters most. ***[Slide of professional woman working at computer at her desk]*** But in this day of outsourcing and corporate downsizing, we can lose our jobs literally overnight. If our job is what matters most, we could be in real trouble. For other people, health is what matters most. ***[Slide: person or persons jogging or exercising in gym]*** The problem is, our health is not dependable. It can go south at any time and at any age. If health is what matters most to us, we could be in real trouble. Many people would say their loved ones are what matters most. ***[Slide: of family together, maybe even family with grandparents, children, and grandchildren]*** We depend so much on our family, as we should. The problem is that loved ones are not always dependable. They grow up, they move away, they die, and sometimes they say they want a divorce. As important as relationships are, if our loved ones are what matter most to us, we could be in real trouble. ***[End slide]*** Finances, work, health, loved ones—these are all very important. But if these are what ultimately matter most to us, we could be in real trouble. Why? Because these things are not dependable. None are completely secure. All are tentative, temporary, and easily lost.

Well, what matters most? That's the question behind today's scripture reading from Mark 12. A religious leader comes up to Jesus and asks, ***[slide: image of man asking Jesus a question with the caption: “What is the greatest commandment?”]*** In short, he is asking, “What matters most? Of all the things that clamor for our time and attention and energy, what's the most important thing?” ***[End slide]*** And without hesitation, Jesus answers him. But Jesus doesn't mention any of the things that Americans hold most dear. He doesn't say anything about career success, or accumulation of wealth, or owning a big house, or physical

beauty, or fame, or power, or patriotism, or anything like that. Instead, Jesus said, **[slide: same image as above with caption: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12)]** So what matters most? According to Jesus, love matters most. According to Jesus, the most important thing in life is our relationships, with God and with others. **[End slide]**

I know this is not new to you. It’s Christianity 101. It’s the ABC’s of Christian faith. But we need to be reminded—often—that what matters most in life is not money, or a lovely house, or things, or success, or beauty, or fame, or power. What matters most in life is loving God and loving others. Which means we need to our relationships with God and others the first priority of our life.

Several years ago, The Atlantic magazine published an important article called “*What Makes Us Happy?*” The article told about the longest running study in history of human happiness and well-being. The study spanned 70 years, seven full decades. It began in the 1930s at Harvard University and only recently was completed. Researchers followed Harvard graduates through college, war, work, marriage, divorce, parenthood, grandparenthood, old age, and death. The director of the study was asked what had been learned from this 70 yearlong study on human happiness and well-being. His response was, **[slide: “The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships with other people.”]** 70 years of study at Harvard University came to the bottom line conclusion that the only thing that really matters in life are our relationships with other people. This Harvard study is pretty remarkable. A seven decade study came to one conclusion about human well-being: the only thing that really matters in life are your relationships with other people. As we see in today’s text, Jesus would agree with that finding, with one important addition. Jesus would say, **[slide: “The only thing that really matters in life is your relationship with God and with other people.”]** **[Pause for a moment, then END SLIDE]**

One of my heroes is Fred Craddock. Fred is a retired pastor, author and seminary professor. Some years ago, I heard Fred tell a story about a young girl that used to attend his church. She was about seven years old and came to his church regularly. Her parents dropped her off at church every Sunday morning, but they never came. They had more important concerns. They were upwardly mobile people, very ambitious, and they didn’t have time for

or interest in spiritual matters. What mattered most to them were money, success, and status in their community. They gave big parties at their house almost every Saturday night. Not for entertainment or enjoyment, but as part of their upwardly mobile strategy. So, they invited just the right people, the ones just above themselves, the ones who could help them climb the social ladder in their community. These parties were always loud with lots of drinking and lasted late into the night. But every Sunday morning, they brought their beautiful seven year old girl to the church.

Well, one Sunday morning, Fred Craddock looked out and saw the girl, along with her parents. He was amazed to see them at church. At the invitation, the parents came forward to join the church and renew their Christian commitment. After church, Fred talked to them. He asked, “What prompted you to join the church and rededicate your life to God?” They said, “Well, we had a party last night, and it got a little loud and a little rough and there was too much drinking. All the noise woke up our daughter. She walked downstairs, and as she reached the bottom of the stairs, she saw that we were eating and drinking. She said, “Oh, can I have the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. Goodnight everybody” and she went back upstairs. Well, you could have cut the silence with a knife. “Oh my land, it’s time to go...” “Oh, look at the time, we must be going...” “We’ve stayed so long, we must leave now...” Within 90 seconds the room was empty. Mom and Dad were picking up crumpled napkins and spilled peanuts and half eaten sandwiches and taking empty glasses to the kitchen. And as they cleaned up they finally met at the sink, and they look at each other, and he says what both are thinking—“What in the world are we doing with our lives?” It was the moment of truth for them. What counts? What matters?

They put on a pot of coffee, sat at the kitchen table, and talked until 4 a.m. They decided that night that making a lot of money and being successful and climbing the social ladder was not what matters most. In fact, if pushed too much—those were bankrupt values. Instead, that couple decided that what mattered most was having a relationship with God, and with each other, and with their daughter, and with real friends—not just people who could help them climb the social ladder. That night that couple finally realized that Jesus was right—the greatest priority in life is relationships with God and others—the greatest priority in life is to “love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves.” And that, my friends—that is what matters most.

###

God Questions: Jesus' Answers to Seven Big Questions Part 5 - What Brings Fulfillment?

Proverbs 11:25, John 13:1-17

Most of you are familiar with Habitat for Humanity. Today I want to tell you a little bit about how Habitat came to be. **[Slide: photo of Fuller in action, at build site perhaps]** Habitat began many years ago with a man named Millard Fuller, who died several years ago. Even as a boy, Millard was a wiz at business and finance. For example, when he was only 13 years old, his father, a farmer, gave him a scrawny pig as a pet. **[END SLIDE]** Millard took that pig, bred it with other pigs on the farm, and became a teen age livestock trader. During high school he made enough money from raising pigs to pay his entire four years of college.

At college Millard went into partnership with a friend selling all sorts of items, and then they invested their profits into real estate. By his senior year of college, Millard was making 50,000 a year from his investments. After college, Millard and his partner went into the mail-order business, and were wildly successful. A few years later Millard fell in love with a woman named Linda. They married and had two beautiful young children. By now Millard Fuller was in his early 30's. He was extremely successful in his business, and he was a millionaire. Not only was Millard successful and rich, he also had a lovely wife and two beautiful children.

Millard Fuller had it all—success, money, health, marriage, children, status in the community, and on and on. Millard Fuller had achieved the American dream. If anybody should have a fulfilling life, it would be Millard Fuller. But the sad truth was that Millard and his wife were not fulfilled. In fact, one day Linda came by Millard's office and told him she didn't think she loved him anymore. Millard's brush with divorce resulted in some serious soul searching in his life. Over the next few months Millard and Linda made some important decisions in their life. First, they decided to not to get a divorce, but to stick it out and work it out. Second, they made the radical decision to sell their business and their possessions, and they gave the money away to charity. And third, they decided to devote their lives to serving other people. It's a long story, but the end result is that Millard Fuller, along with his wife Linda, founded Habitat for Humanity.

About a dozen years ago, I heard Millard speak at a Habitat for Humanity rally in Cookeville, Tennessee. His speech was about the joy of service. He talked about how important it was for every person to find a way to give back, a way to serve others, and how Habitat for Humanity was a great way to do that. He said to the crowd, **[Slide: same photo of Fuller above with quote: “The happiest, most satisfied and fulfilled people I know are concerned about something bigger than themselves.”]** Millard was not saying that everyone needed to be like him and quit their business and give away all their assets and start up a non-profit organization. Very few people can do that or are called to do that. On the contrary, Millard affirmed that God could use our jobs and our businesses and our abilities and our financial assets to do great things in the world. He strongly challenged the group to find ways to serve others, because when we serve others, we serve God. And when we engage in service to others, said Fuller, that’s when we will find joy and fulfillment in our lives. **[END SLIDE]**

We’re currently in a series called God Questions. Today’s question is **“What brings fulfillment?”** The short answer is—service to others. And that brings us to today’s remarkable scripture reading. **[Slide: Jesus washing feet of disciples that I sent earlier. During this brief paragraph, pan the image some, give it some movement]** In this passage, Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God, gets down on his hands and knees, takes on the role of a lowly servant, and washed his disciple’s dirty feet. He told them that by doing this, he was giving them an example, that they should serve one another. In doing this, Jesus shows us that real fulfillment in life comes from serving others. When we, like Jesus, take up our towel and wash the feet of other people—when we find ways to serve others and help others—that’s when we will find real life and real joy. We see that truth in the last verse of today’s text. Jesus said, **[Add to slide: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” (John 13:17)]**

This is a crucial insight. When we serve others as Jesus did, we will be blessed. You see, self-centered people, people who only live for themselves, will never be fulfilled. Self is too small a god to serve. Fulfillment only comes when we serve others. That’s what Jesus meant when he said we had to lose our life in the service of God and others to find life. There are hundreds of ways that we can do that in our church and/or in our community. But Jesus and the entire Bible are very clear. If we want to have a fulfilled life, we must find ways to serve others. As Jesus told his disciples after washing their feet, if you serve others as I have served you, “you will be blessed.”

That same theme is found throughout the Bible. [Slide with moving water in background: “A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.” (Proverbs 11:25)] For example, Proverbs 11:25 puts it this way, “A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.” The key to a fulfilling life is service to others, because serving others is the best way to serve God. And, it’s never too late to begin. **[End slide]**

That was certainly true for a man named Gus Kirzinski. Late in his life, Gus was diagnosed with inoperable cancer and was taken to a hospice to die. When he arrived he felt great fear, anger, and cynicism. “Why did I get cancer?” he repeated, as if for some strange reason he should have been exempt from the disease. “What does God have against me?” One day he stomped down the corridor because he hadn’t received the service he demanded. Then an event happened that transformed his remaining weeks of life. Gus was walking down the hall when he saw a five year old kid. He couldn’t believe his eyes—a five year old in a hospice. He went to a nurse and said, “What is that kid doing here? This is a place where old people die, not little kids. He was told that the child had fallen off a tractor, temporarily cutting off oxygen to her brain. The accident resulted in paralysis. She could not talk nor could she see. Nevertheless she was able to hear and respond to simple instructions.

Gus stared at her through the doorway. He couldn’t fathom how something like this could happen. “She’s only five years old,” he said repeatedly. He later learned that her parents lived 600 miles away and could only visit on weekends. The next morning Gus again walked by the child’s room. “Who’s taking care of that kid?” he shouted at the nurses. After one such blast a nurse replied, “Maybe you ought to do it.” Shocked at the thought, he went back to his room. “Who’s taking care of that kid?” he kept asking. After most of the patients had gone to bed, Gus put on his slippers and went into her room. He turned on a soft light and said, “Hi, kid.” There was silence. Louder, he intoned: “Hi, kid. My name is Gus.” Still no response. Then he took his large hand and grasped one of her fingers. At that very moment the little girl squeezed his hand. And in that moment Gus was transformed—from a bitter, fearful, angry person to one who could love and serve. For six weeks they “talked” to one another through handshakes. He read her stories. He turned on her favorite music. He found a little red wagon, propped her safely within it, and they would go on little “trips” around the hospital. As time passed, they developed an intricate language of communication as they snapped their fingers back and forth. “When Gus died,” said a nurse, “he died smiling. He was no longer Gus the fearful patient. Now he was Gus ... the friend of a five year old.”

Hear again the word of God from Proverbs 11: [Previous slide of Proverbs 11 with the water background: “A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.” (Proverbs 11:25)] Hear again the words of Jesus, [Previous slide of foot washing with text: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” (John 13:17)]

(We concluded the sermon by singing the chorus, “Make Me a Servant.”)

###

God Questions? Jesus' Answers to Seven Big Questions Part 6 - What About Suffering?

Matthew 27:27-31, 41-46

NOTE: If you using this series for Lent and Holy Week, this sermon would fall on Palm/Passion Sunday. The service would begin with a mood of celebration (Palm Sunday emphasis) and would then shift to a somber mood (Passion Sunday emphasis). You could outline the service around two major movements: "The Praise of Our Lord" and "The Passion of Our Lord."

St. Mary's congregation gathered on Friday evening for their annual Good Friday worship service. After several lay Scripture readings on the passion of Christ, the guest speaker walked to the pulpit. The preacher, a visiting monk, looked at the congregation but said nothing. After a lengthy moment of silence, he picked up a large candle and then walked to a statue depicting Jesus hanging on the cross. The statue, placed in a dark corner of the church, could barely be seen in the evening light. The monk lifted the candle to Christ's head, illuminating the crown of thorns. He then placed the candle near the outstretched arms of Christ, shedding light on one nail-scarred hand and then the other. Next he placed the candle near the side of Christ, exposing the wound from the soldier's spear. Finally, he placed the candle at the bottom of the statue so the congregation could see the stake pound into Christ's feet. With that he blew out the candle, and dismissed the service.

At the center of Christianity hangs a crucified God. The New Testament devotes more space to Jesus' passion and death than any other aspect of his life. Clearly Jesus' suffering is central to Christian faith. Although the cross of Jesus is an ugly scene of brokenness, pain, and death, it is also a picture of God. Not a God of glory and majesty but a God of suffering who, in physical and spiritual agony, cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). For over two thousand years, in the midst of endless suffering, Jesus' followers, like him, still ask, "Why?"

We are in a series called *God Questions*. Today's question is, "**What about suffering?**" This is not a new question. The people of God have asked that question from the very beginning. For example, that's the question behind the book of Job. Unfortunately, there is no final answer, at least not one our finite minds can comprehend. As Paul once said, "we know only in part" and

“we see through the glass dimly.” We don’t have all the answers about suffering, and, at least in this life, we never will, so we must admit our ignorance. One day God will make all things clear; but for now we have limited perspective.

However, we do have some answers as to why suffering occurs. For example, a huge amount of suffering is caused by human sin. From creation God gifted human beings with free will. Sadly we often abuse that freedom and make terrible choices that result in suffering. A man smokes three packs of cigarettes a day and develops lung cancer and emphysema. A young person gets drunk, drives her car on the highway, killing an entire family. A terrorist wraps his body with explosives, walks into a busy marketplace, and kills dozens of innocent people. Sin causes untold suffering, including terrorism, child abuse, rape, murder, substance abuse, and environmental irresponsibility. The vast majority of suffering in this world is the direct result of human sin.

The laws of nature also cause suffering. In order to have life on our planet, natural laws are required. However, those life-giving laws make suffering inevitable. Take gravity for example. Life could not exist on earth without gravity. But visit the orthopedic wing of any hospital, and you’ll learn that gravity sometimes hurts people. Although gravity is a life-giving necessity for life to exist, it also causes pain. The same is true with weather patterns. For example, the collision of warm and cold fronts in the atmosphere that produces life-giving rain also creates occasional tornadoes. On a larger scale, earthquakes and tsunamis sometimes cause enormous suffering in our world. Both tsunamis and earthquakes are caused by shifts in the crust of the earth. Our planet could not support life without such shifting. Without it the planet would literally disintegrate. Like gravity, the shifting crust of the earth is a life-giving necessity, but it also causes suffering.

In short, life as we know it on this planet cannot exist without pain. Suffering is the price tag we pay for the glorious gift of being alive. Human sin and life-giving laws of nature explain much of the suffering in our world but not all of it. Through the years other answers have been offered to explain suffering, including the presence of evil in the world. All of these explanations are helpful. But they are also tentative and incomplete. No final, definitive answer exists for the problem of suffering. Paul was right, “We know in part” and “We see through the glass dimly.” And even if we had perfect answers, that really wouldn’t help. For example, if our child dies, and we had a perfect intellectual explanation of why it happened, we would

still be overwhelmed with grief. When suffering occurs, we cannot help but ask, “Why does God allow suffering?” But even if we had an answer, our pain would persist. Therefore, a more helpful question is “Where is God when suffering occurs?” When children get leukemia, teenagers die in accidents, good Christian people contract Lou Gehrig’s disease, or communities are devastated by tornadoes, where is God? That’s a profoundly important question. The Christian answer to that question is clear. There’s no ambiguity here, no “seeing through the glass dimly.” Instead the answer is straightforward. Where is God in the midst of suffering? God is right smack in the middle of it. We learn that from the cross of Jesus, as we read about in today’s text.

Several years ago I taught a confirmation classes on the topic of worship. Just for fun I sent the young people on a sanctuary scavenger hunt. I asked them questions like, how many pews do we have? How many black keys are on the piano? What can the choir see that the congregation cannot see? One kid said, “The bald spot on the back of the pastor’s head!” One of the questions was, “How many crosses can you find in the sanctuary?” The day before, I walked into the sanctuary and counted eight of them. But I was wrong. Our confirmands found several more that I missed. Then one of our smart 6th graders said, “I’m not sure of the exact number, but I estimate there are 800 crosses in the sanctuary.” At first we thought he was crazy, but then he held up a hymnal. On the front cover of every hymnal is a cross. A few moments later, another child held up an offering envelope from a pew rack. She said, “If you add the crosses on our offering envelopes, we have thousands of crosses in the sanctuary!” And that’s as it should be.

Christianity is a religion of the cross. The cross is at the center of our faith. That’s why we have a cross in the center of our sanctuary. It reminds us in a powerful way that our God is a suffering God, that our God is a God of the cross. All four Gospels devote more space to the death of Jesus than any other part of his life. It’s profoundly important for people of faith to remember that we serve a crucified God. Years ago, Jesus was nailed to a cross and he suffered and died on it. He agonized on it. He even felt God forsaken on it. The older I get, the more important the cross becomes to me. Through the years I’ve prayed with hundreds of cancer patients, preached a lot of hard funerals, counseled with large numbers of broken families, and responded to more tragedies than I care to remember. Like you, I’ve seen plenty of darkness and suffering in the world. But the cross of Jesus Christ tells us that even in suffering—especially in suffering—God is present. The cross tells us that God is a crucified

God. Although God does not take away our suffering, God enters into our pain, shares it with us, and ultimately redeems it as we will see next week when we celebrate Christ's resurrection. The Bible tells us Jesus is "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." Jesus' death tells us that when we suffer, God suffers with us.

That was true for a man named David. Twelve years ago David's fourteen-year-old son Rob died in a tragic accident. Several days after the funeral, David, in agonizing grief, drove to a Roman Catholic bookstore. There he purchased a wooden crucifix, depicting Jesus suffering on the cross. David drove home, opened his toolbox, and grabbed a hammer and nail. He then walked to the kitchen and hammered the crucifix to the wall, right above his son's empty chair at the dinner table. Every evening, when he stared at Rob's empty chair, David lifted his eyes to the crucifix and remembered that God, like him, had suffered great grief. The crucifix did not explain his son's death. Nor did it take away the pain of that death. But knowing that God suffered with him allowed David to survive that horrible time of pain and grief. Twelve years later that crucifix still hangs on David's wall. It reminds him that the God of the cross is always with him, even in his deepest suffering.

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God Questions? Jesus' Answer to Seven Big Questions

Part 7 - Is There Hope?

Matthew 28:1-7

Since childhood, I've been enamored with submarines. When I was a kid, and my father served at a military base in Hawaii, our house was just one block from the Pearl Harbor canal. My best friend and I spent many hours on the banks of that canal, watching ships and submarines cruise by. We even got to go inside a submarine once, which, for twelve year old kids, was incredibly cool! Well, several years ago, I heard a submarine story that captivated my imagination. Many years ago, a Navy submarine lost its power and sank to the bottom of the ocean floor. As soon as they could be deployed, divers descended to the sub. They had no idea if anyone on the submarine was alive or not. So they investigated the disabled ship, endeavoring to find some signs of life within. At last they heard a gentle tapping. Listening intently they recognized the dots and dashes of the Morse Code. The message coming from within the disabled sub was: "Is there hope?"

"Is there hope?" is a crucial question. People can live without a lot of things. But it's almost impossible to live without hope. Which reminds me of an interesting story from WW II. A large community of Jewish people were living in a Jewish Ghetto, which were basically German prisons. They had been living in the ghetto for several years. They were just barely surviving, they received no news about the war's progress, and they finally ran out of hope. As a result, several people were committing suicide every day. And then, everything changed. One day a young Jewish man from the ghetto was detained by a German soldier. While he was waiting to talk to an officer, he heard a radio report. The news report said that the Allied army was not far from this ghetto, and were moving that direction. This news filled the man with great hope. Hope that the Germans might be defeated. And hope that he and his people might soon be delivered from the ghetto. His news spread like wildfire throughout the ghetto, and it transformed them. Once again people began to laugh. Young couples began to make wedding plans. And most significant, the daily suicides came to a complete halt. Hope, you see, is a powerful thing.

I've been in full time ministry for 30 years. One thing I've learned during these years is that hope saves people's lives. Hope saves them spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and

sometimes even physically. People hope for many things. They hope for forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing. They hope faith will return, finances will recover, or grief will finally end. They hope their addiction can be overcome or their marriage can be saved. They hope for life beyond divorce. They hope for the courage to face “the valley of the shadow of death.” When people can keep hope alive, they somehow find the strength to take another step in spite of the darkness and pain of the present moment. Hope is a powerful force. Hope can save a person’s life in every way a life can be saved. And hope is what the resurrection of Jesus Christ is all about.

Of course, it didn’t start that way. Very little hope remained for the followers of Christ on Good Friday and on Saturday. They saw their beloved Jesus betrayed, abandoned, placed on trial, mocked, beaten, and crucified. They watched as his abused, lifeless body was placed in a tomb. The disciples of Jesus felt utterly devastated; all hope vanished. They hid from the authorities, fearful for their own lives. But on the third day, on Easter Sunday, God declared that death would not prevail and evil would not win. Early on Easter morning, the incredible news broke forth, “He is not here; he has risen!” And that news of Christ’s resurrection from the grave gave Jesus’ followers renewed hope—hope for life and hope even for death. You see, the last word of the gospel is not crucifixion but resurrection. The last word of the gospel is not despair but hope. The resurrection of Jesus Christ tells us that God is in the business of bringing life out of death. And God doesn’t just bring life out of physical death, important as that is. God also brings life out of smaller deaths, like the death of a dream, the death of a marriage, the death of a career, or the death of good health. And that great Easter hope—that God brings life out of death—gives us hope for living and even hope for dying.

Many of you are familiar with the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*. Although it deals with some dark themes and is not meant to be watched by children, it is a profound film with powerful spiritual themes. Shawshank tells the story of a young bank executive named Andy Dufresne. Andy, falsely convicted of murdering his wife and her lover, was sentenced to two life terms in a notoriously brutal state penitentiary called Shawshank Prison. While there he met a black man named Red, and the two struck up a unique friendship. It’s a long and complex story, but ultimately it’s a story about affirming hope in a place where little hope existed.

In spite of being an innocent man in a tough prison, Andy held on to hope—hope of escape, and hope of life beyond prison walls. And that hope is what kept him going. Andy’s dream was to go to a little Mexican town on the Pacific Ocean and own and operate a hotel on the beach. Red chastised Andy for holding on to such a fairly-tale pipedream, but Andy wouldn’t let the dream go.

In one of many powerful scenes in the movie, Andy talked with his friends about the need for hope, especially in prison. Red, angry by Andy’s naïve words of hope, said, “Let me tell you something, Andy Dufresne. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It’s got no use on the inside of these prison walls.” But Andy didn’t buy what Red said. Andy continued to hope, even after twenty hard years at Shawshank prison.

And Andy didn’t just have hope for himself; he also inspired hope in others. For example, he helped young men get their GED, and he built a first-class library for the inmates. In the end Andy even inspired hope in his dear friend Red, the one who said hope was a dangerous thing. After spending twenty years in Shawshank prison for a crime he did not commit, Andy finally escaped. Not long after Andy’s escape, Red found himself paroled. But Red wasn’t adjusting well to life outside prison. In fact, he almost decided to commit a crime so he could return to the security of prison life. However, one thing kept him from implementing that plan. Andy left Red a letter, inviting him to come to Mexico and be his helper at his hotel. In the letter Andy said to Red, “Remember, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.” And so, with hope in his heart, Red decided to go to Mexico. As he traveled on the bus, excited as a schoolboy, Red spoke the final words of the movie. He said, “I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope.” Like the gospel of Jesus Christ, the final word of *The Shawshank Redemption* is the word hope. In the final scene of the movie, Red and Andy are reunited on the beach in Mexico. And so it was, that through the power of hope, Red was finally redeemed.

In the end, the Christian faith is a religion of hope. Christianity doesn’t deny the darkness and pain and struggles of life—not at all. As we saw this past week, Christianity is a religion of the cross, and God is a crucified God. But the cross is not the last word in Christianity—the last word is hope. After the devastating experience of Friday came Sunday. After the cross came the resurrection. And the resurrection is all about hope. So we gather on this Easter weekend

Sunday for the precise purpose of affirming hope. Like those sailors in a disabled submarine at the bottom of the sea we tap out the question, “Is there hope?” Is there hope for living, and is there hope for dying? And the Christian answer—the Jesus answer—the Easter answer—is yes. There is hope, because the tomb is empty, because the crucified one is alive, because Jesus Christ the Lord has risen from the dead! Thanks be to God.

