

Futile Traps Reveal Fakes

Matthew 22:15-45

Mark Vroegop

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his talk. 16 And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" 21 They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." 22 When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

23 The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, 24 saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.' 25 Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother. 26 So too the second and third, down to the seventh. 27 After them all, the woman died. 28 In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her."

29 But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. 30 For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 31 And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 32 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." 33 And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

34 But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. 35 And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" 37 And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, 42 saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." 43 He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 44 "'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'? 45 If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" 46 And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. (Matt 22:15-45)

You learn a lot about people not only by what they say, but also by the questions that they ask. Questions reveal a lot. More than we might think. The reality is that every question is loaded

to some extent, and they can be pretty telling. Let me give you a few examples. Maybe you heard some of these over Thanksgiving (hopefully not):

- How's your rebellious teenager daughter doing?
- How much money did you make last year?
- Do you like my new haircut?
- Have you been putting on weight?
- When are you going to get married?

The problem with each of these questions is the agenda behind it. The question is just as revealing (maybe even more so) as the answer that will be given.

Our text today highlights four very revealing questions. Three of them are directed to Jesus by religious people, and the fourth is a question that Jesus asks. This is a remarkable exchange that continues to escalate the tension between Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem. These questions and Jesus's answers reveal a lot.

Let's look at each of the four questions and then figure out what questions we might want to ask ourselves.

Four Revealing Questions:

Remember that the setting for these questions is the city of Jerusalem, and we are only one week away from the crucifixion. Jesus has already cleansed the temple, cursed the fig tree, redefined greatness, and told the religious leaders that God was rejecting them. Now the religious rulers go on the offensive, and they try to trap him with three questions. Jesus responds with his own question.

1. Do we have to pay taxes? (v 15-22)

The strategy of the religious rulers now shifts. In view of his disruption of the temple court and his specific attack upon them, they view Jesus as a threat. Therefore they begin to attempt to find ways to trap Jesus in his words. Their strategy is to alienate him from the people.

The Pharisees sent their disciples along with some of the Herodians to question him. This is an interesting move on their part because the Herodians and the Pharisees had strong disagreements. Both groups represented a particular political-religious philosophy. We know more about the Pharisees who were strict advocates for the law, and they had little use for Rome or their puppet King named Herod. Given the name Herodians, this group was likely a pro-Herod faction of the Jewish people. Therefore, it is very interesting and telling that the Pharisees involve them. It must have been to increase the controversy.

Their approach to Jesus is to first flatter him. Do you know the difference between flattery and gossip? Gossip is saying something in person's absence that you'd never say to their face; flattery is saying something to a person's face that you'd never say in their absence.¹ They don't entirely believe what they say: "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion for you are not swayed by appearances." (v 16)

Then they get to their question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (v 17) Rome had many forms of taxation, but this particular tax was likely the poll or census tax. It was a tax that was not based upon commerce or travel; it was a tax for being a Jew and living in your own land. Therefore, it was onerous, and the question was whether or not the Law allowed for such taxation.

Jesus could see that this was a trap coming from a desire to do him harm (v 18), so he asked for a coin to be brought. Upon receiving the coin Jesus asked them about whose inscription and image was on the coin. (v 20) The Roman coin would have likely had an image and an inscription portraying the Emperor as divine and high priestly ruler. When they respond, "Caesar's," Jesus famously replies, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (v 21) Everyone marveled at what Jesus said and left him.

Now what did he say? Jesus slipped through their trap by identifying that God's rule and Caesar's rule might not be entirely contradictory. Sometimes they certainly are in conflict, but not in every situation. In other words, he is saying here that there could be room under the rubric of God's authority for Caesar to also have authority. The lines might not be as clear or black and white as what you might want – especially if you hated Rome. Jesus made things more complicated because he indicates that they are really living in two realms – God's and Caesar's – and they have obligations in both.

2. What is the after-life like? (v 23-33)

Since the Pharisees were unsuccessful, another group takes a shot. This time it was the Sadducees who posed a question to Jesus. They are an interesting group who were continually at odds with the Pharisees over the resurrection from the dead and the after-life. Based on their view of the Old Testament, they held that the soul ceases to exist when the body dies. They were students of the Law but they were historically from the aristocracy and the high-priestly party, and in order to retain their hold on power, they had cooperated with the Romans. Therefore, the controversy with Jesus is troubling to them because it threatens their power base.

¹¹ I'm grateful to Tim Keller for this helpful definition.

They ask him a question that mixes one's views of marriage and the after-life. It was designed to stir up the historic divide between Sadducees and the Pharisees, and it was intended to be the kind of question that would ridicule or embarrass Jesus. They were sure he couldn't answer it. Here's what they said:

"Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.' 25 Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother. 26 So too the second and third, down to the seventh. 27 After them all, the woman died. 28 In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her" (Matt 22:24-28).

Talk about a crazy question! You are almost left to ask, "Who cares?" But from the perspective of the Sadducees this question represented why they didn't believe in the resurrection because it created so many problems. They viewed earthly relationships as final and ultimate, so the complications of this scenario would be, in their mind, a great example of how foolish the resurrection is.

Jesus responds rather bluntly. He says that they are wrong because they "know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." (v 29).

30 For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 31 And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 32 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." (Matt 22:30-32)

He tells them that they are mistaken regarding the nature of marriage in the next life, and he cites a familiar text (Exodus 3:6) as proof is presently the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In other words, Jesus indicates that the three patriarchs are alive.

However, the real problem here is that the Sadducees knew enough of the Bible to make their unscriptural views seem right. But they weren't. It is scary to see that the Sadducees study the Scriptures but they didn't really know the Scriptures or the power of God. Just because they were smart, uppity, and had Bible knowledge didn't mean that they were right. And with this simple answer, Jesus silenced them.

3. Which commandment is the greatest? (v 34-40)

The third question comes again from the Pharisees. They were probably disappointed that the previous traps didn't work. Therefore, they devised another question designed to trap Jesus into elevating one command over another. They asked him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (v 36)

It is safe to assume that the Pharisees think that Jesus will cite one of the 10 commandments, but he doesn't. Instead he cites Deuteronomy 6:5 which would have been a well-known passage to all of them since every devout Jew recited this verse daily. But Jesus takes this question a step further by adding the connection to loving one's neighbor. Here's what he said:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:37-39).

Jesus identifies that love for God and love others are the target of true and ultimate obedience. The Pharisees are concerned about how to measure which of the commandments is the most important, and Jesus doesn't even cite one of the commandments that they are thinking! Amazing. Instead, Jesus brings them back to the very heart of what true obedience is – loving God and loving others.

However, Jesus is not through. Not only does he tell them about the importance of love, he says that the Law and the Prophets – the two things they love the most! – hang on this love command. Love for God and others is not just the ultimate way to keep the law; it is the very basis for the law. It is the foundation and the goal!

Once again the Pharisees have shown that while they are striving for obedience, they are missing the very heart of God.

4. Who is the Christ? (v 41-46)

Jesus has successfully managed to navigate his way around three difficult questions, and now he asks the Pharisees a question – a very important question. This will be the last back and forth exchange that Jesus will have with the religious leaders prior to the night of his crucifixion, and it centers around the reality of who Christ is.

Jesus begins with a warm-up question. "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" (v 42) The name Christ means the chosen or anointed one, and it was the common way to refer to the Messiah. Therefore Jesus is asking them an important question about who they anticipate the Messiah to be. The Pharisees rightly answer, "The Son of David." (v 42) Jesus has them right where he wants them.

Now it is his turn to ask them a challenging question about the relationship between David and the Messiah-Son.

"How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 44 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'? 45 If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" (Matt 22:43-45)

Do you understand that nature of Jesus's question? He cites Psalm 110, the most quoted Psalm in the New Testament, and a psalm written by David as the crux of his question. It is a Psalm that highlights the divine blessing and preeminence of the Messiah. But if he is a son how could David, as the father of the Messiah, call the son Lord? How could the son of David also be worthy of his father's worship? Great question but the Pharisees don't know how to answer.

Of course they don't! The only answer to the question would be to acknowledge that the son of David would also have to be the son of God. They don't have a category in their brains for that kind of thought, and they are surely not going to give Jesus any opportunity to assert once again that he is this Son of God.

Our text concludes with stunning silence: "And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions." (v 46)

Three questions from the religious rulers and one question from Jesus. Both the questions and the answers are very revealing. We see again the antagonistic and loaded agenda of the religious leaders, and we learn some important things from Jesus as he navigates their trick questions. Their futile traps reveal how fake they are.

Three Cautions:

This section is primarily about the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, but there are a number of interesting lessons that we learn from the exchange. Let me give you three.

1. Beware of living for only one realm

"Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" is more than just a clever answer to a trick question. It is a statement that reveals an important piece of the Christian world-view, and one that many people easily miss. Jesus is telling us that while we live in a world with real governments, real emperors, and real currency, there is another reality beyond what we can see and touch. Rome is real, taxes must be paid, the emperor is to be respected, but these are not ultimate.

There is another reality, another kingdom, and another rule: God's. St. Augustine called it the City of God while we live in the City of Man. John Bunyan described it as a man named Pilgrim on a journey to the Celestial City. Jesus points out that while there is a real earthly existence that we live, it is connected to the ultimate rule and reign of God. And this reign is not only a positional one, it is an ethical one. The reign of God transforms everything.

It takes the normal elements of life and adds the ethical and transformational elements of the gospel to them. For example, authority and power are gifts from God (Rom 13:1), you work as

unto the Lord (Col 3:23), marriage is a picture of Christ and the church (Eph 5:25), sexuality is a spiritual one-flesh union (1 Cor 6:16-17), giving is about eternal investment (Matt 6:19), and good works are done as if they were done to Christ (Matt 25:40). Jesus points to a kingdom that involves what we see but is not “of this world.” When the apostle Paul reflects on this he said,

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:1-2)

To follow Jesus means that you see everything in your life through a gospel-transforming lens. You see and do everything through a kingdom of God lens.

2. Beware of the unbalanced, self-justifying use of Scripture

The second observation is a very important one, especially if you have a certain level of Bible knowledge. It is remarkable and scary that the religious leaders knew the Scriptures very well, and they often used the Scriptures to justify their sinful attitudes and actions. They were able to find particular teachings in the Torah (the Old Testament Law), and they would debate it and argue about it while at the same time missing the heart of obedience.

It is dangerous to know the Bible well enough that you can add a Scripture verse to what you are doing. Don’t get me wrong. I would commend the study of the Bible to you, but I would urge you to be very careful to watch out for the tendency to baptize what you do or say with a Bible verse. I’ve seen it so often. A person begins to study and learn the Bible, and they see the power of it in people’s lives. But they also see what happens when they use a Bible verse: some people (particularly religious people) back down. They see the power of this, and they use it to their advantage, sinfully so. They zero in on an isolated verse and cite it as a justification for what they are doing or what they believe. Quoting the verse makes them feel and seem spiritual, and it gives them a perceived “leg up” in the argument with others. There is a very fine line here because you can use isolated verses and individual phrases in the Bible to justify just about anything. Most cults (remember David Koresh), radical groups (a.k.a. Klu Klux Klan), and even Satan himself use the Bible to their advantage. The Scriptures must be handled with great care and balance. Just because you can cite a Bible passage doesn’t mean that you are right. Here’s what Paul said about this:

5 The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. 6 Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions. (1 Tim 1:5-7)

Some of the scariest counselees I've ever had were the religious ones. For instance, a man who had committed adultery on his wife more than a dozen times once told me with all seriousness that his wife needed to obey him because Jesus said, "If you love me you'll keep my commandments." The problem with that statement (and I said this to him) is the simple fact that he is not Jesus!

Oh beloved be very wary of baptizing what you believe or do with Bible verses. This was the modus operandi of the religious crowd. Be sure what you believe and do fit with the whole counsel of God.

3. Beware of a loveless and Christless Christianity

So what is our remedy for this dangerous and scary position? What can we do to not head down the familiar and dangerous path of the religious fakery? It has everything to do with love. Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God...and love your neighbor as yourself." (Matt 22:37-39) And in the passage we read just a minute ago from Paul he said, "The aim of our charge is love..." (1 Tim 1:5)

Love is the motivation, means, and the goal. It was the love of God that motivated him to send Christ (John 3:16). Jesus said that love would demonstrate that they were really his followers (John 13:35). Without love you could have the greatest gifts in the world and it means nothing (1 Cor 13:1-2). And it is love that is the ultimate expression of obedience and faith (1 John 4:7). That is why Augustine, the first century church father, said "Love God and do what you want."

Keeping love central means keeping Jesus central because he is the ultimate demonstration and example of love. Listen this compelling verse: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16-17).

Don't miss this! Jesus was sent to the world in order to reveal what true obedience and true love really looked like. He was full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Therefore the ultimate remedy for this spiritual fakery that plagues the religious people is to love Jesus and to live like Jesus.

If you miss Jesus or the heart of Jesus, you miss everything! There is no life, no obedience, and no righteousness apart from him. Jesus is the only remedy to being a religious fake.

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