

Any Questions?
John 7:10-36, 40-53
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July 10, 2022

For the entirety of his career, my father has worked as a trial lawyer. He's spent a significant amount of time arguing cases in court, and while I think his natural talents serve him well in this field, his experience in court definitely sharpened his skills. As a result, there were times that he would sort of bring his work home, and the dinner table might start to feel just a little bit like a courtroom.

For instance, we might be sitting around the table and he would ask me, "how was school today?" And I, being a taciturn middle schooler, would respond, "fine." "Just fine?" he'd ask, trying to get me to elaborate. "Yeah, it was pretty good," I would offer, thinking to myself that with "pretty good" I'd now given him twice as many words as I had the first time around and surely this would be a sufficient response to satisfy his curiosity. "Well," he'd say, "which one was it—'fine' or 'pretty good?'" Suddenly I was on the witness stand, and his questions seemed sharper and more pointed. Like arrows.

It was far worse if I had committed some kind of minor transgression (which, for the record, didn't happen often because I didn't care for the line of inquiry it invited). One winter, I was riding my bike on a pretty busy road—a road I was allowed to be on, but one that had a decent amount of traffic—and I fell. I was fine, but I knew that my mom would get really upset at the thought of me potentially falling amidst speeding cars, so I decided to say nothing about it when I got home. The problem was that I had been wearing a long-sleeved shirt, and when I fell, I tore a hole in the sleeve.

That night at dinner, Dad noticed the hole.

"How'd you tear your shirt?" he asked.

"What?"

"Your shirt," he said. "It has a hole in the elbow. How'd you tear it?"

"I'm not sure," I said.

"You're not sure?"

"No, maybe I caught it on a tree or something."

"You caught it on a tree, but you didn't hear it rip?"

"I don't know if I caught it on a tree, but if I did, I didn't hear it rip."

"And you didn't feel it rip?"

"I guess not."

"It's a pretty bad tear."

I think I just shrugged my shoulders this time, sort of an "I don't know what to tell you" gesture, and it was at this point that my dad told me straight up that I was not a good liar.

Having a father who is an attorney has many perks, but navigating interrogation as an adolescent is not one of them.

He was also my Sunday school teacher throughout high school, and he taught Sunday school the same way. The only difference here was that there were other people in the room, and usually I'd let them handle the scattershot of questions instead of joining in the fray. Sunday school offered me just a little distance, and that let me watch Dad work and start to understand—a little bit—the method to his madness.

A good trial lawyer knows that questions are some of the most valuable weapons in his arsenal. The trick, like most weapons, is knowing how to put them to use. The trick is to make sure that the goal is clear.

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The seventh chapter of John is a dense and tangled slew of questions, so many questions, questions offered by pretty much every character in the scene. Jesus asks questions, the Pharisees ask questions, a nondescript group of Jews ask questions, even Nicodemus shows back up and asks a question. Today's reading includes seventeen questions in forty verses. Each time someone asks a question, it seems to send everyone else into a dither, leading to panic and essentially evoking the scene of a high-stakes courtroom.

These queries in the seventh chapter of John are all different, questions used in different ways to try to maneuver the conversation and the crowd into certain positions. To make sense of this (again, thorny) scripture, it is best to pay special attention to the questions.

But first, a little background: as we approach John 7, roughly a third of the way through the gospel, Jesus is building momentum and gaining a following. He has already performed several miracles, which John calls signs, and those miracles are creating a real buzz. Some of the buzz is positive (among people who are fascinated by this man and wonder if he is prophet or Messiah) and some of the buzz is negative (among people who find him threatening and would like to see all of this fervor end). Both kinds of buzz are building as a critical Jewish holiday known as the Festival of Booths approaches.

Some who are close to Jesus exhort him to attend the Festival of Booths with great fanfare, but he knows his adversaries wait for him to destroy him there, and he instead goes to the Festival in secret, biding his time. When the Festival is at its midpoint (and therefore the most crowded), he begins to teach.¹ And while the first question of the chapter comes before he teaches—a crowd asking “where is he?” as it awaits Jesus' arrival—it is Jesus' teaching that will lead to the true agitation of the scene. This is where the questions really begin cascading and overwhelming, usually leading to more questions, and this is where it makes sense to probe in order to make sense of this scripture.

The first volley of questions takes place between Jesus and “the crowd,” a group of Jews who have gathered for the Festival and who hear him teach. It is clear that the crowd is split in its opinion of Jesus, with some finding him “a good man” and others distrusting him. Not surprisingly, their questions are also split, with some suggesting amazement and others coming off as far more defensive.

¹ O'Day, Gail. “The Gospel of John,” *New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 9. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 617. O'Day's commentary helps summarize the somewhat confusing plot of this chapter in a number of ways.

The “amazement” questions—such as wondering where Jesus is, marveling at his teaching, and pondering whether Jesus may be the long-awaited Messiah—demonstrate what is probably the most common goal for asking a question: to learn. The Jews who ask “Where is Jesus?” want to learn his whereabouts; the ones who inquire “How does this man have such learning?” and “Can it be that this is the Messiah?” are attempting to learn the truth about who Jesus is. We ask questions when we recognize that we need to be enlightened, when we are yearning for a truth that evades us. It is the most innocent and guileless question-asking that takes place in this scene (and, as far as I can tell, a kind of question-asking that pretty much never takes place in a courtroom). It is how we approach a question when we are children, or new, or growing—with a desire to learn.

It is not how Jesus uses questions in this section of the seventh chapter of John. He already knows the answers to everything he asks. These are closer to the questions my father used in Sunday school. They are, largely, rhetorical questions—questions that Jesus employs to help those who are gathered think about the situation more clearly. “Did not Moses give you the law?” Of course he did—Jesus knows this, and so do those who are gathered. “Are you angry with me because I healed a man’s whole body on the Sabbath?” They are, and they shouldn’t be...and Jesus knows this, and so do they. Jesus’ goal with these questions is not to learn but rather to teach.

The first day of Sunday school, Dad sat us down and told us that he would be teaching us through the Socratic Method, which I’m sure you’re familiar with. It is essentially the same instruction that Jesus uses here: a means of asking questions to guide a student toward a particular truth. It is a remarkably effective didactic technique, because it allows students to come to their own realizations instead of having facts handed to them.

Again, this crowd is split, and Jesus’ relationship with these people is therefore more complicated than simply “students-and-tutor.” Some of those who are gathered are vehemently opposed to him, and Jesus therefore also uses questions to attack. “Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?” isn’t really the Socratic Method; it is an inquisition that pulls the darkness into the light to quell it, that stakes a claim to the high ground.

The response from those gathered who oppose Jesus is another question, essentially a denial, “Who is trying to kill you?” This response leads to yet another category of inquisition, one that is perhaps best illustrated by the Pharisees in the second half of this chapter.

Before moving to that section, here’s another quick recap: because Jesus has appeared and stirred up the crowd in the temple, the Pharisees decide to take action and have him arrested. They don’t want to get their hands dirty, so they send the temple police to handle this. The temple police, however, get caught up in Jesus’ teaching as well, leading to a somewhat amusing back-and-forth between the Pharisees and the police, and eventually everyone goes home with no one arrested.

If the interplay between Jesus and the crowd takes center stage in the first half of this chapter, the Pharisees themselves move into the spotlight in the second half. Although he remains the focal point, Jesus himself does not appear in the final fourteen verses. The questions in this section primarily come from the Pharisees, and their questions are a fascinating blend of parry and thrust. Their attempt to arrest Jesus has gone extraordinarily poorly, and as a result they have to shift to a defensive position quickly.

Their defense consists of two different techniques. The first is to use questions to distract, to change the subject or shift attention. You may be familiar with this technique from your school days, as it's extremely popular in a classroom full of teenagers who haven't prepared. When I came through school, we had a few teachers who were particularly susceptible to a "distract with questions" ploy. This usually happened on a test day. A group of students would gather before class started and realize that, even though the test had been well-advertised ahead of time, they were not prepared to take it. "Just one more night to study!" they'd say to each other. Then, as class started (without even talking about a plan, just nodding to each other in unspoken agreement), they would begin to ask the teacher questions.

Usually the initial questions were germane to the subject at hand, things like "Is this going to be on the test?" or "were we supposed to read that chapter?" But eventually, the questions would spill over into other areas, sometimes areas that were nowhere near the material of the class. If you could keep the questions going long enough, suddenly there wouldn't be enough time left in the class to take the test, and it would have to be postponed until the next day. My chemistry teacher, Mr. Hunter, who was several years past retirement age when I had him, was a prime target for this strategy. One time, I remember not taking a test multiple days in a row because different students kept distracting him with questions, with him winding up telling us stories about hitchhiking across the country as a young man.

This is part of what the Pharisees are doing, although it's a strategy first employed by some in the crowd. After some of Jesus' teaching has caused the crowd to believe "he is a true prophet," others respond, "but he's from Galilee, right? Isn't the prophet supposed to come from Bethlehem?" They're looking at a detail that has nothing to do with the lessons Jesus has imparted and making that the focal point. They're using a question to distract...because there is no actual defense to the words that Jesus has spoken, for the stance that this sector of the crowd and the Pharisees take.

Sometimes, of course, simply distracting isn't sufficient enough a defense...and in those cases, the Pharisees use questions to trap. First, this happens with the temple police, who have been dispatched to arrest Jesus but then return empty-handed. When the Pharisees ask why Jesus hasn't been arrested, the police testify about the impressiveness of Jesus' statements. The Pharisees then turn the tables, using questions to ask whether the temple police themselves have "been deceived." If they have, the subtext suggests, then the Pharisees may have to seek similar punishment for the police themselves. If they haven't, then they should go back and arrest Jesus. The police are trapped.

It is Nicodemus—one of the Pharisees but one who appears open-minded toward Jesus and who has approached him for a conversation at least once before—Nicodemus who comes to the defense of the police (and of Jesus). He reminds the Pharisees that judgment without a hearing isn't permitted under Jewish law. We should not be surprised that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, is capable of using a question like this to maneuver the group...but he is outnumbered, and the Pharisees turn on him just as they have turned on the police. Here, they distract and trap, turning the attention back to Galilee (where Nicodemus may or may not have been from) and trying to dismiss Nicodemus and his point.²

In the end, Nicodemus's distraction diverts the attention away from Jesus, he is strong enough to evade the other Pharisees' trap, and everyone returns home. But the table is set. The Pharisees and Jesus all know how this will eventually play out.

² Bruno, Rolin. "Was Nicodemus a Galilean?" *Real People meet a Real God*, <http://rolinbrunoauthor.blogspot.com/2017/07/was-nicodemus-galilean.html>. 2017-07-22. Accessed 2022-07-05.

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These are the goals of the questions in this chapter: to learn, to teach, to attack, to distract, and to trap. They are common goals, goals we recognize in our own experience today. There is a nearly universal aspect to the nature of the questions that John highlights in this scene.

The problem is that these goals are so different from one another. In some cases—teaching vs. learning, attacking vs. defending—they're the exact opposite. So when a question appears, it becomes absolutely critical to have clarity about the goal of the question or else frustrations abound.

It's important to note that pretty much everyone in this scene uses questions for multiple goals. The crowd and the Pharisees want to learn and to attack; the Pharisees also want to distract and trap; even Jesus both teaches and attacks with his questions. It's not that any one goal is good or bad. It's knowing how and when each is appropriate. It's recognizing what goal is put forth when any given question is asked.

When I was younger, I had no idea why my dad was asking questions. As I grew, I learned how to tell the difference between the questions he asked because he was trying to learn something about me, the ones he asked because he was trying to teach me, or the ones he asked to trap me. Recognizing his goal helped us connect better...but it didn't come automatically. The intonation and the line between the different goals is very, very thin.

In our world, this has become particularly vexing because of how public our questioning has become. It's not hard to imagine a scenario where a guest goes on a news program to share about what he has studied extensively. The host asks questions about the guest's area of expertise, and the guest thinks that these are so that the host (and audience) can learn. After a question or two, however, it becomes clear that the host is really trying to attack or to trap the guest...and then an ugly chaos erupts all over the set.

The same thing happens, frequently, with our social media. Someone will post an innocent question and end up attacked, or someone will attack and then—in the counterattack—claim that it was just an innocent question. When our words are posted, texted, or emailed, their meaning and their goal becomes obscured. It becomes easier for us to read words like those and draw lines of division instead of actually communicating, sharing, and connecting. There is remarkably little grace in the online world of inquisition.

Chapter 7 is a significant turning point in the gospel of John. From this point forward, Jesus will find himself in the crosshairs of his enemies. He will continue to teach and defend, but it comes with peril and eventually with a price. He continues to demonstrate rhetorical skill, and there seems to be something we can learn from that. Throughout all of his words—and all of his questions—he pushes for the community that surrounds him to continue to learn, to defend, even to attack.

The ability to use interrogatives is one of the greatest tools at our disposal—for all of us, not just an attorney or a Socratic teacher. The story in John 7 reminds us to use the gift of our questions carefully, to pay attention to the how and why of what others ask us, and to seek to use our questions to learn and to teach, to attack what is wrong, to defend what is right, to edify. It is a step forward on the path that Christ finds himself on, and the path that he encourages us to walk as well.