

February 26, 2012

First Sunday of Lent
A Question of Spiritual Maturity
John 1:43-51

Opening Words: John Simone Sr. once said, "*The key to wisdom is knowing all the right questions.*" I think he is right. Even without answers, questions have value. After all, what is a question? A question is nothing more than a request for more information. Only fools think they know everything. How many questions have you asked in the past week? How many questions have you asked in the past month? How many questions have you asked in the past year? Jesus asked twenty questions in the Gospel of John. Those questions are the foundation of my newest sermon series, *Questions for Lent and Easter*. We are going to look at twelve different questions the Master asked. Each one is an excellent question because each one is timeless.

We began on Wednesday night. The question on Ash Wednesday was the question of life, *what do you want?* This morning's question comes from a questioning spirit. I have called this message *A Question of Spiritual Maturity*. We find ourselves once again in the first chapter of John. It is the story of Jesus' calling Philip and Nathanael. May God give you ears to ear this morning's scripture lesson, John 1:43-51.

John 1:43-51 43 The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."
44 Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. 45 Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."
46 "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.
47 When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."
48 "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."
49 Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."
50 Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." 51 He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."

I love this story! In *The Last Days Newsletter*, Leonard Ravenhill tells about a group of tourists visiting a picturesque village. They walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, "Were any great men born in this village?" The old man replied, "Nope, only babies." That frothy question brought a profound answer. Some things take time. One of those things, spiritual maturity, is at the very heart of this morning's Gospel lesson. Let us look at that story together.

Once again, we are in the first chapter of John. According to the text, Jesus decides to leave the city of Jerusalem and go to Galilee. However, before he leaves he issues an invitation to Philip. His reaction demonstrates one of those great evangelistic principles. You know it is true. Once you experience Jesus, you want to share him. Philip shared Jesus with Nathanael, who was from his home town, Bethsaida. (Sometimes Nathanael is called Bartholomew.) At this point Nathanael questioned Jesus. He asked the question that must have haunted him the rest of his life. "What good can come from Nazareth? However, once he experienced, Jesus for himself everything changed. He believes in Jesus but Jesus can't believe his spiritual immaturity. That is why verse 50 is so important. *"Jesus said, 'You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.'"*

For years preachers have used this passage as a model for personal evangelism. Today, I want to look at something else. One of the subplots in this story is transformation. Just think about it for a moment. At first Nathanael did not believe in Jesus; Then Nathanael walked with Jesus; Then Nathanael died for Jesus. Tradition tells us Nathanael was martyred in Armenia spending the Gospel. The man who at first does not believe in Jesus ends up dying for Jesus. That is complete transformation. The question is not if Nathanael was transformed; he was. This is the question. Are you being transformed? Are you becoming a looking more like Jesus every day? Or have you fallen in love with your present state? If that gives you something to ponder say, **"Amen!"**

Leroy Eims in his book *The Lost Art of Discipleship* tells the story of a family vacation to Florida. It was spring and his family was somewhere between Fort Lauderdale and Tampa. As far as the eye could see, orange trees were loaded with fruit. When we stopped for breakfast, he ordered a glass of orange juice. The waitress said, "I'm sorry! I can't bring you orange juice. Our machine is broken." He was dumbfounded. They were surrounded by millions of oranges. Inside of those oranges were thousands of gallons of juice. The problem was not the oranges. The problem was they had become dependent on a machine to get it. Perhaps, that is the story of many Christians in our time. They may be surrounded by Bibles in their homes, but they are spiritually dying from malnutrition. They don't know enough to get it for themselves.

This is the first Sunday of Lent. For this reason I want to do two things. First, I want to remind you that you are disciple of Jesus Christ. We are in the disciple making business. In other words, you are to be a little more like Jesus everyday. Second, I want to encourage you start practicing the personal spiritual disciplines. Do you know the four spiritual disciplines? The first is **meditation**. The second is **prayer**. The third is **fasting**. The fourth is **study**. These are four things you can do without me. These are four things you must do to become a little more like Jesus. I want to look at each one of them briefly this morning. Perhaps, the reasons you aren't making any progress in the faith is that some of these things are missing. So if you are ready to begin say, "**Amen!**"

Meditation

The first one is meditation. How much time do you spend meditating? What is meditation? According to Webster, meditation is emptying or concentration of mind: the emptying of the mind of thoughts, or the concentration of the mind on one thing, in order to aid mental or spiritual development, contemplation, or relaxation. When was the last time you emptied your mind and only thought about God?

At this point, I want to challenge you! I challenge you to take 30 minutes during this next week and do nothing but think about God. It sounds easy but it is really quite hard. It is hard for two reasons. First, it is hard because you have to find 30 consecutive minutes. We live busy fast paced lives. Second, it is hard because the agenda of your life will force God out of your mind. However, keep the goal in mind. Thirty minutes with God will change you. Just think about it. For 30 minutes God will have your full attention. What was the last time God had your full attention? Do you remember what Psalm 19:14 says? *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.* And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" If you want to be transformed then you must meditate. If you want to be transformed then you must pray.

Prayer

The second one is prayer. How much time do you spend in prayer? What is prayer? Prayer is communicating with God; prayer is sharing your life with God. Do you remember what Psalm 34:17 says? *The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles.* How much time do you spend in prayer?

Early African converts to Christianity were earnest and regular in private devotions. Each one reportedly had a separate spot in the thicket where they would pour out their heart to God. Over time the paths to these places became well worn. As a result, if one of these believers began to neglect prayer, it was

soon apparent to the others. They would kindly remind the negligent one, "Brother, the grass grows on your path." In the perfect church we hold one another spiritually accountable. We don't just raise money for the budget. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** If you want to be transformed then you must meditate. If you want to be transformed then you have to pray. If you want to be transformed then you must fast.

Fasting

The third one is fasting. When was the last time you fasted? What is fasting? It is not just abstaining from food. Fasting is creating a void. If you fasted for just one meal a week then you would create some extra time. You should spend that extra time with God. Maybe that will be the 30 minutes you will meditate on God? We need to meditate because Jesus meditated.

One of the great stories in the Bible is the story of the temptations of Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11) Do you remember the story? Satan tempted Jesus with food, turning stones into bread. Satan tempted Jesus with popularity, jumping off the top of the temple. Satan tempted Jesus with authority, offering him all the land and kingdoms. You know Jesus resisted all the temptations but did you remember Jesus fasted 40 days first? Jesus fasted and taught about fasting.

Matthew 6:16-18 it quoting Jesus. The Master said:

Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

Jesus fasted and taught about fasting. We seemed to be preoccupied with eating and dinners. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** If you want to be transformed then you must meditate. If you want to be transformed then you must pray. If you want to be transformed then you must fast. If you want to be transformed then you must study.

Study

The fourth one is study. How much time do you spend reading and studying the Bible? Consider these three facts from the 2006 Gallop Polls with me. They are a little dated but they still hold true.

1. Did you know American spend \$2.4 billion on Bibles annually?
2. Did you know less the 50% of all Americans can name the first book in the Bible?

3. Did you know one-third of all American believe Bill Graham preached the Sermon on the Mount?

If you believe we have some work to do then say, "**Amen**" Let me end with this story.

One of the most influential preachers in my life is a man by the name of Tom Tewell. He influenced my style of preaching. I originally heard of him when he was Chaplain of the Week at Lakeside. For many years he served as the pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. Weekly, I would listen to his messages on pod cast. He once told a story that challenges me to this day. You may remember the story.

It was during his ordination interview. He was interviewed by a group of veteran pastors. He was nervous when he walked into the room but he calmed down as he handled each on of their theological questions with ease. He had studied hard through his academic years. He even handled those questions about church history. The time was drawing near the end. He felt comfortable that he had passed his examine. Then a gentleman asked a question he couldn't answer. It came from the oldest preacher in the room, who hadn't asked any other question. Tom Tewell admitted he still stays up at night think about that question. It wasn't even my interview and I think about the question. It is a question that you must answer. This is the question: Are you making any progress in the faith? How do you answer that question?

If you don't know how to answer the question or if your answer is no, then spend some time with God. Spend some time practicing the personal spiritual disciplines. How much time are you spending **meditating** on God? Maybe God is speaking but you aren't listening? How much time do you spend **praying**? God wants you to share every detail of your life with him. When was the last time you **fasted**? It is not about what you are giving up. It is about how you are filling the void. How much time do you spend **studying**? Just read the Bible for your own personal sanctification. Albert Einstein once said, "*Before God we are all equally wise - and equally foolish.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"