

3 Hard Questions

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I mentioned a moment ago, we are continuing our study in John's Gospel. In our morning services, we are working through this amazing account of Jesus' life leading us up to all the great realities of Jesus' death and resurrection. We've been making our way through the section between chapters 5 and 10, where we frequently come across Jesus interacting with people, and often it's people who are questioning Him or opposing Him. And that's exactly what we have again in this passage. And in these dialogues that we have between Jesus and His opponents, we learn some incredible truths about who Jesus is and about what He's done for us in the Gospel. We'll look at the whole section that we read, let me read again, verses 31 to 32. So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in Him, if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Our title today is Three Heavy Duty Questions, and that title slightly inspired my children's talk because, well, it doesn't take much for me to start thinking about machines, but it made me think about that whole reality that when you have these massive machines, they are so impressive, so powerful, so awesome, and yet at the same time, you recognize, whoa, this is something I've got to take seriously.

This is something that I can't mess about with. The issues that Jesus speaks about in this passage are exactly the same. He is talking about some big, big topics, and these prompt three heavy duty questions. Our questions are the question of freedom, the question of identity, the question of truth. I should have put a capital there. Sorry to everybody who noticed that straight away and thought there should be a capital letter. These are heavy duty questions because, A, they're really powerful issues. These are the big, big issues that we need to think about, and that's something that's quite captivating and interesting and important. They're powerful issues, and no matter what your beliefs might be, whatever our background or our convictions, these are issues that matter. These are also heavy questions because we feel the weight of them. These are all issues that none of us can ignore.

That's one of the amazing things about this passage. There's so much in this passage, and I'm so conscious of all the things I won't be touching on. One of the amazing things about this passage is that it shows us that for these heavy duty questions, Jesus has got something utterly brilliant to see. I want us just to work through these together.

We start with the question of freedom. In verses 31 to 32, Jesus teaches the people who are listening to him about what lies at the heart of discipleship. In other words, what lies at the heart of living as a Christian. When we talk about life as a Christian, we talk about that using the term discipleship. If you are a Christian or if you become one, to be a disciple means that you are somebody who is trusting in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins, and you are following Jesus for the rest of your life. The life of discipleship is a life following Jesus. Now, for the first disciples, they literally did exactly that.

They followed him around. Jesus was an itinerant teacher, and they followed him, listening to him, learning from him. Now, for us, it's not identical. Jesus is now risen, and he is at the right hand of God in heaven. We don't physically follow him in the way that Peter, James, John, and the rest of the disciples did. However, we do follow him, and we follow him by listening to his teaching. Or, as Jesus himself says in verse 31, we follow him by abiding in his word. Now, what that means is that if you are a Christian or if you become one, it means that our aim is to live lives that are shaped by Jesus' teaching. Now, it's absolutely crucial to say that that is not what makes us Christians. We're not saved by the life that we live. We're not saved by saying to Jesus, oh, look, you said, do this, do that, and do the next thing. I'm doing it, therefore I'm a Christian. That's not how we become Christians. We become Christians through a childlike faith in the saving power of Jesus. We trust in him to do everything needed for our sins to be forgiven. But then, because of what Jesus has done

for us, and because we are Christians, we then seek to live lives that honour him, that follow him, that conform to the teaching that he gives us. And we do that because of the incredible love that he's shown towards us, that God has shown to us through Jesus. And we do that because the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us and is transforming us to make us more and more the people that God created us to be. So, we don't wonder this way or that, or certainly we strive not to wonder this way or that. We don't just pick and choose which parts of the Bible we want to listen to. We want instead to abide in his word. And as Jesus emphasises here, that is the mark of true discipleship. And honestly, it just makes perfect sense. Jesus is not asking for anything complicated here. It just makes sense. And you see that when you compare it to other things, you think of a wedding. In a wedding, two people become husband and wife. And in that moment, and vows are taken, a pronouncement is made, and in a split second, you go from being two people who aren't married to two people who are married. And so that's the kind of moment when the marriage happens. But really, if you're truly going to be a husband or truly going to be a wife, it's not that moment that defines it. It's what you do for the rest of your life. If you go on from the wedding date and you just completely do your own thing, you live in separate places and take absolutely no interest in each other's lives, you're not a true married couple at all. And it's actually true at an even more basic level. Have you ever signed up for Duolingo or for Peloton or for a couch to 5K? You get your phone, you download the app and you're like, I'm now a couch to 5Ker. And you don't do anything. And I'm going to embarrass myself in lockdown. I can't be more going to say this. Lockdown, download an app called Sixpack in 30 days. You're surprised to know I don't actually have a Sixpack, but I actually don't. Needless to say, three years later, I still don't have a Sixpack even though I signed up for it because I didn't do anything. Gave up after a few days because it's actually much more difficult than the app made it look.

[7 : 41] We all do it, don't we? You kind of sign up for something. You think, yeah, I'm that. And then actually, there's no effect in your life whatsoever. That's the point that Jesus is making here. That yes, we are saved by trusting in him, but that's not then just something that lies in the past and that we never think about. It transforms the rest of our lives as we abide in his word and as we follow him. So Jesus is telling us that discipleship involves remaining within the boundaries of what he teaches in his word would abide within the boundaries of his word. No, straight away, that creates a big, heavy duty, intellectual collision that we need to think about because when we speak like that, it immediately clashes with the way many, many people around us think today in a modern society. The modern mindset of 2023 that here's the words, if you're truly my disciples, you must abide in my word, you must stay within these boundaries. Our reaction to that can be that sounds a bit restrictive. And we recoil from that kind of confinement in terms of how we live. We think to ourselves, you know, that's going to take away my freedom and that's going to place boundaries in my life that I'm not sure I want. And yet Jesus is saying, if you follow me, if you abide in my word, if you stay within the boundaries of my teaching, you are not going to be restricted. You're going to be free. And that's such an incredibly relevant, fascinating and important question for us today because it pits the gospel against some of the most dominant voices that we see in our society around us. So on the one side, you've got this coalition of Disney movies and advertisers and existential philosophers and pop songs and YouTubers who are all saying, just believe in yourself, be who you want to be, follow your dreams, do what you want, and you will be free. And

I was watching Dora last night, the movie, that's my kind of movie, I'm not into anything heavy. It was actually really good. If you're not seeing the Dora movie, it's very, very good. But you get this in the Dora movie, there's this massive thing they've got to jump over. If you just believe in yourself, you can do it. And of course they jump over this ridiculously massive thing. And that's the end. You're just do what you want to do and you will be free. And so you've got this, all these voices saying all this. And then on the other side, you've got Jesus saying, the only place you will ever find freedom is if you abide in my word. Who's right? Because these voices are incompatible. Who do we listen to? Well, I'm sure you're not surprised to know that I'm going to argue that Jesus is right. And the reason I'm doing that is because I think we can prove that he is right. And we prove it not just from what the Bible reveals to us, but we also prove it by looking at the world around us. So I'll say three things briefly. Jesus is proved right by the way our society functions. We talk about freedom, we thought about, we talk about people being able to do whatever they want. We talk about the idea that we don't have boundaries. And yet the truth is, every single one of us lives our lives within the context of boundaries.

The whole way in which a free Western society functions is because of the existence of boundaries. And the place where you see that perhaps most clearly is when you think of somebody being released from prison. When someone is being released from prison, they are getting their freedom. But that freedom is simply an opportunity to conform to the boundaries of society once again. The whole reason they are in prison is because they ignored those boundaries and they transgressed them. And that led to their liberty being taken away. And now that they're free again after their sentence has been completed, it's an opportunity to not to say, I can do what I like. It's actually to be like, no, now I can stay within the boundaries and be part of a functioning society. Again, a less serious perhaps example is passing your driving test. You pass your driving test, you are free. But do you just go and do whatever you want with your car? No. You go and you absolutely stay on the right hand side of the road. You stay within the speed limit. Well, you should stay within the speed limit.

You conform to boundaries. And that gives you freedom. So the way a society functions shows that, you know, that actually freedom comes within boundaries. Second thing I want to say is that Jesus is proved right by experience, because this kind of great message that we have, follow your heart, be whatever you want to be. Don't listen to anybody except yourself.

It hardly ever works in terms of actually finding freedom. Often what you tend to find actually is when you reach the point, you know, even if you do reach that dream, it will lead you feeling trapped rather than free. And that can be very true at work, especially if you go up the ladder. If you get promoted, if you gain more responsibility, whether that's climbing the ladder in a large organization or whether it's maybe, you know, branching out and having your own business or whatever it may be, you think to yourself, oh, if I can get to that level and have more freedom, and then you get there and you realize I've got less. Because the pressures and responsibilities that brings can leave you feeling trapped.

[14:11] Here's an interesting example. The most powerful person in Scotland is Hamza Yusuf, the first person in the world who is trapped in a very hard, hard job. And you see it in loads of other ways as well. This kind of follow your dream. You know, you'll be free if you can just be what you want to be. And that's what you need to be. And you need to be free.

And you can see it in loads of other ways as well. This is you can be free if you can just be what you want to be. And that narrative only ever focuses on the winner, doesn't it?

I was watching Britain's Got Talent last night at a very culturally exotic night last night, And watching Britain's Got Talent, great, wonderful, seeing all these people. There's only going to be one winner. And for every golden buzzer, for every big cheer, there are many, many people who just get the X that says, no.

You think of someone like Marcus Rashford, number 10 from Manchester United, brilliant footballer, done amazing charity work. He's made it, and his story is fantastic. But the fact that he is number 10 for Man United right now and for the coming years means that there are hundreds and hundreds of people who won't get that dream.

Because he's the only one who's got it. And so whatever it is, whether it's Oscars, Bake Off, Football, whatever, in the kind of dreams that society tells us to chase, for every winner, there are far, far more losers.

[15:58] And then just to kind of top my argument off, Jesus is proved right when you look at society. He's proved right when you look at experience. He's also proved right when you look at a coalition of science, history, and philosophy.

Because all three of these will tell you that nobody exists in a situation. No human ever exists in the context where they are free to do or be whatever they want.

Science will tell you that you're restricted. I can't fly up to that balcony. I just can't. History will tell you that we're restricted. We all live within particular contexts of location, time, circumstance, opportunities.

And philosophy will tell you that you're restricted. You can't even say that word philosophy without a whole pile of assumptions and presuppositions shaping the way you think.

And so this idea that we can just kind of be free to be, whatever we want to be, it's just not true. And it doesn't take much effort to see that it's a very kind of empty message.

[17:04] And so the truth is, in terms of freedom, we have to conform to bigger realities that are around us, whether that's at a social level in our nation, whether that's at a kind of physical level in terms of physics, and ultimately, you know, at a spiritual level, what we conform to is what will

determine our freedom.

Jesus is telling us that, faced with that reality, the place where true freedom is found is when we listen to Him.

That is when we find freedom. If you abide in my word, you're truly my disciples, you'll know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

And the great truth that Jesus then unpacks is the fact that the choice between following Jesus or departing from Him, which is the choice facing these people who are listening to Him today, the choice between following Him or turning away from Him, is a choice between obedience to God or slavery to sin.

That's what he emphasizes in verses 33 and 34. The other thing that these verses show is that this modern mind isn't really very modern at all.

[18:28] It's found in first century Judaism as well, because they are instantly offended by what Jesus said. They said, we don't need to listen to you to be free. And they're adamant that they've never been slaves to anyone, as you can see there in verse 33, which of course is ironic because it's completely inaccurate, because the Jews were slaves for centuries in Egypt in the Old Testament.

But they don't like what Jesus is saying. They don't like the fact that he's claiming that freedom is found in listening to Him. Jesus responds by explaining to them that if we depart from His word, in other words, if we do whatever we want, we're not freeing ourselves.

Instead, we're showing ourselves to be slaves to sin. Now, here Jesus is exposing one of the biggest myths in human experience.

And he's teaching us one of the most important lessons that we can ever learn. And that's true for all of us, whether we're Christians, whether we're not yet true to Christians, whether we're long on the Christian journey, whether we're just at the start, all of us need to listen to this, because Jesus is exposing a massive myth.

He's exposing the myth that says, I can be master of my sin.

[19:51] I can be master of my sin. Now, we've all got to reckon with that, because we all think like that. I think like that, because it's incredibly easy to think like that.

We see something that's sinful. And we're attracted to it, which is part of our fallen nature. And we think, I can do that.

I can indulge in that a little bit. I can dabble with that. And then I'll be able to put it down again. I can control it. I can be master of it.

And we all think like that, Christian, not yet Christian, everyone. And the key point is this, when we are tempted towards sin, if we cannot resist that temptation, then we are not the master.

We are the slave. This is a very trivial example. But over the past two months, anytime I've gone into any shop, I've faced an extraordinary inner battle with temptation, because of all the counters, whenever you go and buy anything, there is this magnificent box of Cadbury's cream eggs.

[21:00] So good. I love a cream egg. I have to really watch what I eat. I don't have a six pack. And I'm a long way from a six pack. And I'm heading in the opposite direction.

So I have to watch what I eat. I can't just eat a cream egg whenever I want, even though I love cream eggs. And if I go to a shop, and if that cream egg is there, the box, and if I'm feeling weak, and if I give in, and I buy it, am I the master?

Or am I the slave? Whenever we think, I'm going to ignore Jesus' teaching. I'm going to sin, whether that's in terms of losing our temper, or gossiping, or being greedy, or in terms of sexual temptation, or in terms of aggression, or whatever it may be.

We all struggle with sin in different ways. What we've got to recognize is that whenever we do that, it is never a demonstration of our strength and our independence.

It is only ever a capitulation. And in contrast to that, Jesus is calling us to follow him and to abide in his word.

[22:18] And he can do that because he is our maker. And by following what he teaches, we are actually conforming to what he's made us to be. And that is where we find freedom, when we become the people we were created to be.

And we do that by abiding in his word, by leaning on him, by trusting him, by following him. The question of freedom is a heavy duty question.

But Jesus gives us the answers that we need. I need to move on very quickly because the blooming clock is moving far too quickly. OK. Next question, the question of identity.

The Jews were offended by what Jesus was saying. And part of their response to that offense is to appeal to their sense of identity. They say, where the offspring of Abraham? And so immediately, they are looking back to their Jewish identity.

Jews, descendants of Abraham, through Abraham's grandson, Jacob, who was also given the name Israel, from whom the Old Testament nation of Israel came.

[23 : 22] And that lineage, that history, that heritage, that nationality, that gave these Jews a sense of identity that made them feel unique.

And I think it's also the case that at times, that sense of identity made them feel superior. And you see a little bit of that just in a fascinating verse later on in the passage in verse 41, where they say to Jesus, Jesus says, you're doing the works that your father did.

And they said to him, we're not born of sexual immorality. We have one father, even God. Now, why did they say that to Jesus? We're not born of sexual immorality. Well, it's generally agreed among commentators, and I think they're right, that this is a jive at the circumstances around Jesus' own birth.

You'll remember that when Jesus was born, it was before Mary and Joseph had, well, when Jesus was conceived, it was before Mary and Joseph had married.

And of course, that, it seems to be the case that that was noticed, that was remembered, that was held, and they're almost trying to say, but you're, your story, you're accusing us.

[24 : 30] Your story has got some issues. And they're taking this kind of jive at Jesus saying, we're not like you. And they've got this sense of kind of pure lineage.

Their past is so kind of good. Jesus, you know, that's, we've heard things about when you were born. And so they're kind of trying to say to Jesus, we're not like you.

And in terms of their identity, they're appealing to their heritage, to their purity. And they were not slow to judge someone who in their eyes had a past that didn't match up.

Now, of course, we know that Jesus was not conceived and born in sexual immorality, but that was how it was being perceived. The key point is that it's so easy for us to do the same. We can, we can do this kind of thing in lots of different ways.

We can do it in terms of our general sense of identity, whether that's in terms of our nationality, in terms of our family history, our background, our accent, our football team, even our race.

[25 : 34] And tragically, that can be used by humans. It's frequently used by humans as a means and an excuse to judge others. And racism is one of the most desperate examples of that.

But that can happen in other ways as well. We can have a strong sense of our national identity, whether that's globally or even within the UK. We can have our sense of identity as to which part we're from.

Even in our island, we can do it. We've got our Ruachs from point and our Backachs from back and our Nishachs from nes. And we all kind of think that our Ach is just a wee bit better than all the others.

Everybody thinks like that. And it can happen in terms of our faith. And especially it can perhaps happen in terms of our church. So we might really identify ourselves as free church in terms of 180 year history, going back to 1843.

Or we might see ourselves in terms of the Lewis Church and maybe draw our identity from the amazing things that God has done on this island in the years, in the decades and the generations that have come before us.

[26 : 43] Or even if you've got a different church heritage, you might have a sense of identity in that. I grew up in the Episcopalian Church. I was then part of Stornoway Free Church, then part of Back Free Church. All that feeds into my sense of church identity as well.

And in all that, there's so much that's good. And there's so much to be thankful for. But at the same time, what I want us to just think about is the fact that we can so easily ground our identity in something to do with our historical connections or something to do with our past or something to do with the lineage that we come from.

And then we can use that as an excuse to judge others. This is what I want us to see. The Jews are constantly appealing to their past in this passage, their ancestors, their history, their heritage, their purity.

Jesus, however, is constantly pressing them in terms of what they are right now. You see that in these verses.

I'm not going to read the whole verses because it's a wee bit long and time's running out. But there's this constant, constant, present tense emphasis in what Jesus is saying.

[27 : 56] He says, you seek to kill me. He talks about what they do. He talks about them, again, seeking to kill me. He talks about them doing the works.

He talks about them not understanding that they cannot bear to hear his word. He talks about what they are of that you are of your father.

There's more. You can look at it yourself. There's just this constant emphasis in what Jesus says about what they are right now. And here, Jesus is pressing into every single one of our hearts, the issues that really matter.

And that's for all of us. As Christians, this is what matters. What are you right now? Are you following Jesus last week and in the week to come?

Is that what we're thinking I want to do? I want to follow Jesus. I want to listen to him. Are we repenting of sin today? Coming today thinking, Father, I am sorry that I did that or that I didn't do that, whatever it is that may be lying on our hearts.

[29 : 10] Are we looking to him for help? Are we seeking opportunities to serve him? Are we resting in him? Finding our security in him, finding our joy in him?

Now, I'm not saying any of that to guilt you. I'm not saying that to kind of be like, oh, you should be doing all this stuff. None of us are doing these things perfectly. But what I'm trying to say is that this is what matters. What we are right now, not what your past is because the past is in the past, not what experiences you've had or have not have.

That's also in the past, not what heritage you belong to. What matters is that right now you're grounding your identity in the fact that you belong to Jesus now.

He is your Savior. He's your Lord. He's your brother. He loves you so much. And that's where our identity lies. So often in our Christian lives, we can be crippled by the thinking, I'm not making progress.

I'm not what I once was. I'm not what I thought I should be. I'm not like the people I once was. We need to stop all of that nonsense because what we need to do instead is just ground our identity in what we are right now in and through Jesus.

[30 : 26] You are his precious brother or sister, child of God the Father, dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

And in him you are so safe and secure. What we are right now is amazing. And that's what we need to lean into. And for anyone who's maybe not yet a Christian or maybe not yet sure or wondering about all of this, this is the question I want you to think about today.

And in the week ahead, what are you right now? Not has something amazing happened in terms of an answered dream or whatever, I don't know.

Not have I improved dramatically. Not have I sorted out myself. That is not what is needed. That is not what Jesus is asking for you.

What are you right now? Are you trusting in Jesus? Are you resting in him, recognizing actually between me and you, God, I've got nothing except what Jesus has done for me.

[31 : 38] Are you sitting here thinking, I know I have stuffed up a lot. I know I'm going to stuff up a lot, but I really want to follow Jesus in my life.

I want to abide in his word. If right now you are thinking that, then you are a Christian.

Those desires come from the Lord. And please stop waiting for something that doesn't need to come. But if your answers to those questions is no, if you're like, I don't want to trust in him, I don't want to follow him, I just don't want to have to think about it, then what on earth do you want?

What on earth do you want? And where on earth do you find your identity? Because that question of identity is a heavy duty question.

Only Jesus gives us the answers that we need. I've run out of time. The question of truth, well, this is what the devil has used to get between us and God since the very beginning.

[33 : 06] Lies about God, lies about us. Jesus has come to reveal the truth. There's more I wanted to say.

I'm going to pick one of my points because I've run out of time for the rest. The devil, this passage speaks, Jesus draws this contrast between God the Father as the source of truth and the devil as

the source of lies.

The devil has constantly led humanity astray by lies. I'm going to give you some examples. He's led humanity astray with a lie that God isn't good. The idea that God kind of wants to spoil our lives, that's a lie.

He's led humanity astray by saying, we're better off on your own. Do your own thing and you'll be better off. That's a lie. He's led us astray with a lie that other people are the problem so that instead of recognizing our own sin, it's like it's everyone else's fault.

He's led us astray with a lie that sin will satisfy you, that actually turning away from Jesus will be really good. It will be really good and it's a lie.

[34 : 20] But maybe the biggest lie that he tells to people in Carlyway today is the lie that no one cares about you. And that deep down you're worthless.

The truth is you are so precious to God that his own son has come to die for you, to rise again and to call you into his family forever.

That is the truth of the gospel and I can tell you something. That truth sets you free. meals snack
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