

Questions Jesus Asked, Part Seven

John 5:31-37

1. The trial.

- *Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15; 2 Corinthians 13:1; John 5:31-40;
Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:16-17; John 12:20-33*

2. The heart.

- *John 5:41-44*

3. The problem.

- *John 5:44*

4. The solution?

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Questions Jesus Asked, Part Seven¹ *John 5:31-37*

When I was growing up as a kid in the sixties and seventies, there was a television show called "Candid Camera." The show actually started in the 1940's. The genius of the show, and what the announcer said every week was, "We catch people in the act of being themselves." The host and creator was Alan Funt, and he would set up secret cameras and then play pranks on people. It was part entertainment and part social experiment. This was loooooong before the days of social media and everyone having a phone with a camera attached. Shows like "Punked" and "Rediculousness" and "Impractical Jokers" and "The Carbanaro Effect" and clips like "Fail Army" all really owe "Candid Camera." There was one episode called "Face the Rear," that involved seeing if they could influence people getting on an elevator. This is an old episode, filmed in 1962, as you'll be able to tell. But what happens is ageless:

Video (<https://vimeo.com/277929528>)

The social influence exerted by those facing the rear was too overwhelming for that person to remain the only one facing the front.²

Why? Why does it matter so much to us what other people think? That's a question Jesus asked and answered in John 5.

We are continuing in our summer sermon series called, "Questions Jesus Asked." Every time Jesus taught, spoke, or did *anything*, his message and methods were always *on purpose*. So here's the thing: *any* interaction Jesus had with anyone in the Gospels is an interaction he can and will have with *each of us*.³ That means his questions are important, and our answers to Jesus' questions will determine the depth of our relationship with Jesus, will determine the success of our Christian life, the fruit of our Christian life, and the impact of our Christian life. We must answer Jesus' questions well if we are going to accomplish a life of purpose in this world that God has for us.

Last week we looked at Jesus' question in the first part of John 5, and today we're going to look at another question in the second part.

If you remember, Jesus healed a man who had been crippled for 38 years, beginning with the question, "Do you want to get well?" And if you remember, when the Jewish religious leaders heard about it, they questioned the guy. They were not happy for the

¹ Resources:

- Bible Study Series: Best Questions in the Bible <https://jesusplusnothing.com/series/post/JesusQuestions>
- Laura Sweat Holmes, George Lyons John 1-12, *A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 2020)
- Daniel Cash and William Griffith, *8 Questions Jesus Asked* (Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA 2017)
- Dale and Sandy Larsen, *Questions Jesus Asked* (IVP, Downers Grove, IL 2019)
- Joseph Dongell, *John: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1997)

² Source: Mark Batterson, *Play the Man* (Thomas Nelson, 2017), pages 144-145

³ Bible Study Series: Best Questions in the Bible <https://jesusplusnothing.com/series/post/JesusQuestions>

man because he was finally healed; they were angry at the man for carrying his mat on the Sabbath, and therefore they accused him of breaking the law by “working.” That mat was probably his only worldly possession, but he got in trouble for it carrying it. When the religionists found out it was Jesus who healed him, they went and found Jesus and interrogated him; who did he think he was, telling this guy to carry his mat on the Sabbath? And they didn’t like Jesus’ answer; Jesus told them plainly he was simply doing what his Father would do. Well that really got them worked up, because Jesus was claiming that God was his Father – which meant he was God’s Son – which meant he was equal to God; that he was God.

That’s where we’ll pick it up in the chapter. I’d like to read the passage to us. Before I do, let me remind you of what I tell us every week: we do not read Scripture as spectators; we are participants – God’s Word is alive, and God’s Spirit is in his followers, so this story is alive for us and in us. That means we are part of the story, too. So do your best to picture yourself in the story – as if you were right there. As usual, I’d like to ask all of us to honor God’s Word by standing as I read it us. Thank you! We’ll step into the passage with verse 31, where Jesus is responding to the accusations of the Jewish religious leaders:

“If I testify about myself, my testimony isn’t true. There is someone else who testifies about me, and I know his testimony about me is true. You sent a delegation to John, and he testified to the truth. Although I don’t accept human testimony, I say these things so that you can be saved. John was a burning and shining lamp, and, at least for a while, you were willing to celebrate in his light.

“I have a witness greater than John’s testimony. The Father has given me works to do so that I might complete them. These works I do testify about me that the Father sent me. And the Father who sent me testifies about me. You have never even heard his voice or seen his form, and you don’t have his word dwelling with you because you don’t believe the one whom he has sent. Examine the scriptures, since you think that in them you have eternal life. They also testify about me, yet you don’t want to come to me so that you can have life.

“I don’t accept praise from people, but I know you, that you don’t have God’s love in you. I have come in my Father’s name, and you don’t receive me. If others come in their own name, you receive them. How can you believe when you receive praise from each other but don’t seek the praise that comes from the only God?

“Don’t think that I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, the one in whom your hope rests. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, because Moses wrote about me. If you don’t believe the writings of Moses, how will you believe my words?” (John 5:31-47, ceb)

This is the Word of God for the people of God, so thanks be to God! Thank you – you can be seated.

You’ll need to know that in John’s Gospel, after Jesus healed the man at the pool earlier in that chapter, from now on the religious leaders were trolling Jesus, spying on him, arguing with him, harassing him more and more, and looking for ways to trap him and

kill him, until they finally crucify him. That all starts with this chapter. In fact, the chapter plays out very much like a legal trial, with the religious leaders bringing up charges against Jesus, and Jesus serving as his own defense. So to get the context, let's first see...

1. The *trial*.

The religious leaders were accusing Jesus of blasphemy – a crime that was punishable by death. Because Jesus declared himself to be God, they said he was guilty of blasphemy. They didn't want to believe him. Remember we said last week that in John's Gospel, sin is defined as not believing who Jesus is and accepting him. So Jesus responds to their sinful accusations by starting with the Old Testament law itself. You see, according to Deuteronomy 17:6...

“Capital punishment must be decided by two or three witnesses. No one may be executed on the basis of only one testimony.” (Deuteronomy 17:6, ceb)

And two chapters later in Deuteronomy 19:15...

“A solitary witness against someone in any crime, wrongdoing, or in any sort of misdeed that might be done is not sufficient. The decision must stand by two or three witnesses.” (Deuteronomy 19:15, ceb)

Even the Apostle Paul recognized this when he wrote to the church in Corinth and said:

“Every matter is settled on the evidence of two or three witnesses.”
(2 Corinthians 13:1, ceb)

When it came to the accusation against Jesus, the religious leaders only had *one* testimony – theirs. Jesus, though, lays out his case in verses 31-40, and in his defense he cites not one or two, but actually FOUR witnesses to prove he is who he says he is.

First, Jesus cites the testimony of John the Baptist. John's was a prophetic voice – as certain as the Old Testament prophets that the religious leaders claimed to follow. John's ministry had even been validated seven hundred years before by those same prophets, when Isaiah prophesied about John the Baptist (Isaiah 40:3). The religionists themselves flocked to John and, at least for a while, liked what he was saying. John's testimony about Jesus was valid because John was filled with the Holy Spirit, and his life and ministry demonstrated the truth of what he proclaimed from the Old Testament about Jesus.

Then Jesus pointed out that his own teachings and miracles were a testimony that validated that he was God's Son. “(Jesus) was finishing the work that God had given him to complete which testified He was from God.

When Jesus healed it was the work of God.

When Jesus cast out demons it was the work of God.

When Jesus stilled the wind and waves it was the work of God.

When Jesus rebuked and corrected the religious leaders it was the work of God.

When Jesus gave new and heavenly teachings with profound wisdom and insight, it was the work of God.

When Jesus fed the multitudes with a boy's lunch it was the work of God.

When Jesus brought mercy, grace, and forgiveness to sinners he did the work of God.

When Jesus resurrected the dead, it was the work of God.

When Jesus raised his own body from the dead it was the work of God.

Without any doubt each of these things were a powerful testimony that Jesus had come from God.

So in and of themselves these works gave proof of Jesus. It was only the religious leaders who out of hatred and jealousy could not accept these testimonies that Jesus was from God.”⁴

As if those two witnesses weren't enough, God himself testified and validated what Jesus said and did. The Gospels record that after Jesus was baptized:

“...he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. A voice from heaven said, “This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him.”
(Matthew 3:16-17, ceb)

And people heard it. The same thing happened again at the Mount of Transfiguration, when Jesus was glorified, talking to Moses and Elijah, and God said the same thing, and people saw it and heard it (Matthew 17:1-13). Later, in John 12, we see Jesus praying out loud in front of people, asking God to glorify his name, and God said audibly, “I have, and I will.” (John 12:20-33)

Finally, Jesus cites the testimony of God's Word itself. Hundreds of times in the Law and the Prophets it speaks about Jesus with remarkable detail – details that already had been fulfilled at this point in Jesus' life, with more to come. It should have been very obvious that those prophecies were like an exact fingerprint for Jesus. In fact, Jesus tells them that the Scriptures that the religionists researched and memorized all point to him so that they could have abundant life, but they don't even see it. They are not seeing the forest for the trees; they are worshiping the message instead of the messenger, who was God. That's why in the last three verses of that passage, Jesus says that Moses will condemn them because Moses spoke of and looked forward to Jesus. So they are without excuse and it's obvious they are rejecting the testimony of Moses by rejecting Jesus.

After making his defense, Jesus does what he usually does; he gets to...

2. The *heart*

...of the matter by asking the question. This is where we begin to deal with the issue I raised at the beginning, which is our obsession with seeking the opinions and approval

⁴ Gordon Weatherby, *Testimonials to Jesus*, April 19, 2021, sermoncentral.com, accessed 7/21/21

of others. It seems like no matter who we are, we are always either seeking the approval of others, whether it is our parents or our peers or our co-workers, or we are comparing ourselves to others, in order to inflate ourselves.

But Jesus didn't seem to have that problem at all. Let me remind you of what Jesus said when he asked the question:

"I don't accept praise from people, but I know you, that you don't have God's love in you. I have come in my Father's name, and you don't receive me. If others come in their own name, you receive them. *How can you believe when you receive praise from each other but don't seek the praise that comes from the only God?*" (John 5:41-44, ceb)

There are some powerful things implied within this statement and question. First of all, Jesus makes it clear that, unlike us, he does not seek the praise of people. Of course, he wants more than anything for people to understand and believe who he is, because that is the only way for us to be saved and be in a transforming, life-giving relationship with God. But he doesn't need our opinions of him. Here's the key: *Jesus' identity, his value, his character, his nature, is in no way dependent on what people think of him.* THAT is the key to his question, and that is where Jesus is so much different than us. Jesus has already made the case for who he is, and all four of those witnesses prove that *Jesus' identity is found in God.* Yes! – Jesus wants you to believe in him, but whether you do or not has no impact on who he is; whether you believe in him or not has every impact on *who you are.*

That truth points out the contrast between Jesus and us, and that is...

3. The ***problem.***

The problem is stated in the question. We are like the religious leaders; we are always seeking the approval of people. And Jesus made it clear that when we do that, there's no room for the love of God to be in us. This is huge, my friends. *Seeking the approval of others negates our ability to receive and give the love of God.*

The problem is, all of us struggle with feeling inadequate. Far too many of us have experienced some kind of abuse as children, whether it was physical, sexual, emotional, or spiritual. That abuse leaves the person with deep trauma and feelings of shame. The person internalizes what happened, especially when it happens to a child, and the person thinks somehow they deserved it. Others of us didn't get the love we needed or wanted from our parents or significant people in our lives. So whether by abuse or neglect, we are left struggling with feelings of inadequacy. And that leads to a couple of unhealthy responses.

In our pursuit of the approval of others, one response is that we always have an attitude of insecurity and low self-esteem. This is the feeling that, no matter what anyone says and no matter what a person accomplishes, he or she always feels like they're not ever good enough. So they are always seeking the approval of others, always trying to make people happy. If you want a formula for failure, it's that: try to please everybody. Yet so many of us *live* to please others.

Most of you know who Taylor Swift is – the incredibly talented singer and songwriter whose won all kinds of awards and sold millions of records. In her Netflix documentary she described why she went into the music business: "We're people who got into this line of work because we wanted people to like us, because we were intrinsically insecure, because we liked the sound of people clapping, because it made us forget how much we feel like we're not good enough."⁵ It's hard to believe that someone who has accomplished so much could feel so inadequate. Bono, the lead singer of the band U2 said: "What kind of hole exists in the heart of a person when they need to have 70,000 people scream, 'I love you,' in order to feel fulfilled?"⁶

The problem with the insecure mindset is that we keep looking to others to be validated or fulfilled, whether it's performing for large crowds, or going from one relationship to the next, or trying to please our bosses or even our parents. I've counselled men who are very accomplished professionals in their 60s whose fathers have been dead for over a decade, and yet they are *still* trying to get their father's approval.

The problem with living like that is that, no matter how much approval or accolades we receive, *it will never be enough.*

Some of us struggle with what's called "the imposter syndrome" – the feeling like we're imposters; we aren't what everyone thinks we are, and sooner or later our cover will be blown, so we always live in fear. We end up comparing ourselves to others and always seeing how much better others are than ourselves.

So when we are seeking the opinions and approval of others, we are looking in the wrong place, and we cannot fully receive or live in the Love of God. As long as we are seeking our sense of value or worth from others, we don't have room for God. This is why the Bible says over and over and over in the Old and New Testaments, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." We ought to seek God's love, not the love of others. I like what one writer said: "As I grow older, I care less what people think about me and more what God thinks of me. I expect to be with him much longer than with you."⁷

So one response is insecurity or inferiority complexes. But the other response is just as dangerous and unhealthy, and that is to be egotistical, narcissistic, and conceited. Here's the way that works: in our dysfunctional response to what happens to us, we decide that we are going to find our worth within ourselves instead of seeking the approval of others. So we begin to convince ourselves that we are good, that we are the best. There are a couple of significant problems with that. One of course is that we have a sin nature, and if our sin nature is unresolved, it's ambition is always the self; we are constantly trying to make ourselves a god (that was the original sin back in Genesis). So egoism and narcissism feeds our sinful nature and in our own minds is trying to make ourselves a god. So instead of (in the first response) where we are looking to others for approval and comparing ourselves to others to see how

⁵ Taylor Swift, "Miss Americana" Netflix (January, 2020); Emily Yahr, "In Taylor Swift's Netflix documentary," *The Washington Post* (2-3-20)

⁶ Adapted from Stephen Galloway, "Hugh Jackman on His Surprising Hollywood BFFs and Mother's Abandonment," *The Hollywood Reporter* (2-13-13)

⁷ Robert Baker, "Country Road 13" *Christianity Today*, Vol. 35, no. 11

inadequate we are, (in this response) we look to others in comparison to prove that we are better than others. And if we're not, then we put them down or sabotage them in order to make ourselves better than them. So we can always find reasons to justify our ego, when this is our response.

The reason there's no room for God's love in this kind of person is because there's too much self-love.

So either we have too much self-esteem or we have too little self-esteem. Neither leaves room for God to work.

So now I think you are beginning to see the accuracy of Jesus' question when he said:

"How can you believe when you receive praise from each other but don't seek the praise that comes from the only God?" (John 5:44, ceb)

It is impossible to believe in God – to receive his love into our lives – when we are so busy seeking the approval of people.

So what is...

4. The *solution*?

The way to have the love of God in us is to truly believe in Jesus, who he is, what he's done for us, and then to live in that love. I know that sounds like a Sunday School answer, but what does that mean?

It means admitting and accepting that, first, we are never, ever going to be good enough. We all have our flaws, our dysfunction, our scars that have led us to feelings of inadequacy, and we will never, ever find our adequacy in other people or ourselves. But by the same token, we also must admit that our ego is limitless; once we start feeding our ego it is insatiable, because there is always that sin nature in us that wants to be a god. So we are not believing Jesus when we think of ourselves as less than we are, and we are not believing Jesus when we think of ourselves as more than what we are. *Like Jesus, we need to look to the Father for our sense of worth and our right sense of ourselves.* We need to base our sense of worth and value as we get it from God, not from ourselves or others. Only God. So what does God say?

First, he says we are all sinners and we are never going to be good enough on our own. We will never measure up. That ought to wipe out every narcissistic, egoistic thought we ever have.

And, we can never find healing of our damaged selves from anyone else. So whether we are egotistical or insecure, *we need God.*

What does God say about us and what did he do for us? He says that we are so valuable, of so much worth, that he paid the absolute highest price that could be paid; he bought us with the life of his one and only Son. *That's* when we are good enough – not by our efforts, but totally by His, *for us.* So then, when we utterly depend on him, he gives us his Holy Spirit so that, when we are submitted to Christ, we can do anything. Apart from him, we can do nothing.

When we are seeking the approval of others, we are always living in fear; fear of being found out as an imposter or fear of being inadequate or fear of finding someone better than ourselves or fear of not having enough approval from the right people. So instead, fear God! That's what the Bible means by having the "fear of God" – it means to only focus on God and his love for us; to only be concerned with what God says. Oswald Chambers has written some powerful Christian books, and he said once, "The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else."⁸

Are you beginning to see how seeking the approval of others means we don't believe Jesus and we don't have the love of God in us?

The incredible thing is that, when we *do* have that security in God and his love for us, we find freedom to love others like God does. We can offer to others the love of God, which is the answer to *their* insecurity and ego-needs. We can love others and serve others without fear of rejection, because our worth is rooted and established in God's love for us, not people's. We can even love our enemies, because their rejection of us is inconsequential.

I want us to spend some time considering this. Bow your heads, hunker down in prayer, because this is going to take some time and self-reflection.

Prayer

You never have to face the back of the elevator again just because everyone else is. You get your directions from God!

But folks, West Valley *needs* you to believe in Jesus and stop seeking the approval of others; West Valley *needs* the love of God in you. The biggest thing our community needs is people who are so secure in the love of God that they love and serve our community. This is the answer to racism, this is the answer to inequality and inequity, this is the answer to the anger and fear that is out there. We have an entire generation of people who are growing up determining their worth by how many likes and how many views they get, comparing themselves to the picture-perfect lies that others post on their Instagram feeds. They need to know that there is a love that isn't fickle, that is deeper and stronger and wider and smarter and more powerful than social media and the internet. Where will they see that love if not in you?

Pastor Roger

"I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith. As a result of having strong roots in love, I ask that you'll have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, together with all believers. I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:17-19, ceb)

⁸ Oswald Chambers, "The Highest Good." *Christianity Today*, Vol. 39, no. 1