

The Courage to Believe

[Luke 22:66-71](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

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[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

This morning I am continuing in a series of Lenten sermons entitled, "Walking to a Cross." These sermons follow the events of Jesus' arrest, as they are depicted in the Gospel according to Luke. Today we come to the first of Jesus' three trials, which was with the religious leaders. Next week we will look at the second trial, which was before Pilate, and in two weeks, the third trial before Herod. Pay close attention to the questions that are asked of Jesus in each of these trials. Our questions always reveal the path to faith.

The Sanhedrin was the name of the assembly of ruling elders and priests of the Jewish people. They are the first to put Jesus on trial after he was arrested. Eventually they will hand Jesus over to Pilate, and for that reason we in the church have learned disdain for them. But it is important to remember the Sanhedrin was filled with devout and committed religious leaders. In Jesus' three trials, they are asking the questions spiritual people ask. These are the same questions asked by people who come to church.

What is your most pressing question of Jesus? Do you want to know why life has turned out the way it has, or how long you have to wait for a dream to come true? Do you want to know when Jesus plans on bringing a little peace on earth or when we can stop worrying about hijacked airplanes and reporters having their throats slit? You can't read the newspaper without asking Jesus a few questions. You can't even pay attention to your own life without these questions.

The reason we ask these questions of Jesus is the same reason the Sanhedrin ask them. It is because we are looking for salvation. We know that we are not living the life God must have intended for us, we have somehow lost our way, and we would love for life to be saved from the mistakes we've made and the sins we've committed.

The first question the Sanhedrin asked Jesus was "If you are the Messiah, tell us." The word messiah, or Christ, means to be anointed by God to bring salvation to the people. The purpose of this salvation was to restore their spiritual, political, and social lives to the good creation God had in mind all along. So a lot was riding on the messiah.

At first the Hebrews believed God would anoint a new king in the line of David to be this savior. But after the Davidic dynasty was lost, some began to think the messiah would be a priest, prophet, or eventually a rabbi. For centuries and centuries the people continued to wait and ask, "When will the anointed savior appear?"

By the time of Jesus, however, few people were still asking that question. Raymond Brown, the late New Testament scholar, conclusively demonstrated that there was no longer a single national expectation about this messiah in the first century. We have no indication that there were other messianic candidates besides Jesus. No one was really talking about the messiah, and it doesn't show up in the other literature of this era. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century, was so prolific, but he never uses the word messiah. So when Jesus began his ministry, people had grown so accustomed to living without God's messianic intervention they just stopped hoping for it all together.

Perhaps that is where some of you find yourselves this morning. You've prayed and prayed for the deliverance of your marriage, work, or health. You have asked God so many times to intervene in your child's life. You have bowed your head in church for most of your life and prayed, "Thy kingdom come..." But it has been so long now that, to tell the truth, it would startle you if it really happened. You tried getting used to the longing, but when that became too hard, you found ways to distract yourself from it. Now the last thing you want is to hurt like that again.

This was the great obstacle for the religious leaders who had Jesus on trial. Essentially what they were asking was, "Is it really wise, Jesus, to get the people's hopes up? Tell us if you really want to be known as the Messiah."

Now the fascinating thing in this text is that Jesus does not answer their question by saying, "Yes. I am the messiah." In fact, according to Luke, prior to the resurrection, Jesus never says, I am the messiah. It is always others who ask this question or, like Peter, stumble into the affirmation that he is the messiah. And every time that happens, Jesus tells them not to tell anyone else.

Why is that? Why does Jesus keep this a secret? Why doesn't he just come right out and claim in his own words to be the Savior? For the same reason he won't say it to the Sanhedrin. "If I tell you," Jesus said to them, "You won't believe."

No one has ever believed Jesus will restore their lives, forgive their sins, reunite them with God because he claims to be the anointed messiah. They certainly won't believe it just because the church claims that it is true. The reason some people come to believe is because they are daring still to look for salvation.

This is why in Luke 11:9-10, Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." The reason that Jesus told us to keep asking is not because we will get what we want, but because through the process of asking we recover the old longing for salvation.

Asking, searching, knocking on the door are all essential to the human condition. They are ways of remembering that we are

contingent creatures who depend on the Creator. One of the great dangers of contemporary society is that we have so many resources that we think we can just get what we want without having to ask. But whether we realize it or not what we really want is not all the stuff we keep cramming into our crowded life. No, what we really want is God himself.

In that 11th chapter of Luke, Jesus goes on to say that if your child asks for a fish, you are not going to give a snake instead, and if your child asks for an egg, you won't give a scorpion. If you know how to give good gifts to your children, Jesus says, don't you think the Heavenly Father knows how to do that?

When our daughter was growing up, trust me, she felt perfectly free to ask what she wanted. She still does. I may not always give her what she is asking for, but in the interplay between her asking and me deciding how to respond, she has learned over the years that I love her. Even when I say "no," in her best moments, she realizes that this no still comes from loving her. As every parent knows, what you most want to give your kids is not what they are asking for, but yourself.

Similarly, in the act of asking, praying, banging on the door of heaven, we nurture our identity as a people who need to receive what only God can give -- which is God. Again, in the 11th chapter of Luke, Jesus says that when you ask of the Father, he will give you the Holy Spirit. The ministry of the Spirit is always to bind you to all the grace you've already received in the Son. And the ministry of the Son is to bring you home to the Father.

The second question the Sanhedrin asks of Jesus is if he is Son of God? Again, this is a term that Jesus never applies to himself. The term Jesus uses prior to resurrection is that he is the Son of Man, which is used 80 times in the gospels, emphasizing that Jesus identifies with us.

Jesus knows you. He has taken on every one of your longings and needs as the Son of Man. But according to Luke, no human ever understands that Jesus is also the Son of God who can do something about our needs. The angel states he is the Son of God to Mary. The devil states it in his temptation. The demons state it when Jesus casts them out. Even the Heavenly Father himself states it when Jesus is baptized.

So why doesn't Jesus say this about himself? For the same reason he won't say that he is the messiah. In order to believe you have to ask.

When the Sanhedrin ask him if he is the Son of God, Jesus responds with, "You say that I am." This infuriated the religious leaders, and they said, "See we have heard it ourselves from his own lips." But it wasn't the lips of Jesus. It was those who asked the question who revealed his sacred identity as Son of God.

Even when the question isn't asked in doubt, it still reveals the longing for a revelation of God among us. And it is in the longing, yearning, hoping, that we find the answer is before us. Yes, Jesus is the Son of God, the anointed Messiah, the response of God to the yearning buried deep in your soul.

Whatever it is that you are asking for, the Spirit of God proclaims, you have already received God's response in Jesus the Christ. So while we are asking heaven for what we want, the question that God is asking of us good religious folks is, "Why are you looking for more than Jesus?"

Are you looking for direction in life? Then you don't need a lot more direction than Jesus' call to follow him. You can follow him as a banker, homemaker, student, or the President. I don't know that God cares so much as long as you follow Jesus there.

Are you looking for health? Then you have to throw your life into the miracle working hands of Jesus who'll make it clear that most of all you need healing for the sin-sick soul.

Are you looking for love? Then you will never be free to receive the love of others until you have first received the love of a Savior, because otherwise you aren't looking for love from others, you're looking for salvation. And lovers make terrible saviors.

Are you looking for peace on earth and for a world that is not terrified of terrorists? Then first you will have to look to Jesus, the one anointed by God to save us all, because clearly we aren't doing too well at fixing up this world without him.

After every question we ask, the Spirit will point to the Savior we have already received, and renew us in the sufficiency of his grace. Salvation never comes from Jesus and politics, or Jesus and money, or Jesus and a new job. Just Jesus. When we see that, we can follow him to our political lives, business lives, and home lives with abounding hope. For in him all the hope of heaven and earth have already come together. But to fully enjoy this salvation, you have to recover the longing and ask...

Give us the courage, Holy Spirit, to ask the questions we dread asking for fear there may be no response. And give us the courage to believe the answer we have received in Christ Jesus. Amen.