

What Joseph Bazalgette Teaches Us About Grace

John 21:15-17

We've all played some variation of 20 Questions before. One person thinks of a person or a thing and the rest have 20 questions to guess what it is. It's usually a game we play to kill time on a long journey.

Jesus asked a lot of questions, too. We talk a lot about the sermons of Jesus, or his parables, or the conversations he had with his disciples. This is different from that. Jesus often used questions to help people understand what he was about—or to get people to wrestle with something he taught—or to prompt some kind of action that would show that his followers were learning how to live out what he was teaching.

We're almost done with this series—just a few more weeks to go. This hasn't been a game we play just to kill time on a long drive. The goal has been to give us some insight into who Jesus is and what Jesus wants from us...as we are each on our own journey of faith and growth and discovery.

Sometimes the questions Jesus asks are theological—they get at something we're supposed to know about him and his purposes.

Sometimes the questions are ethical—they get at what we're supposed to do or how we're called to live.

Sometimes the questions Jesus asks are confrontational—they force us to see something to change or confess or leave behind. That's the kind of question we have in front of us today.

But before we get to the text...

If you love history, living in London is like a smorgasbord. Everywhere you look you see some monument, some detail about this amazing place, some story that inspires curiosity and study. OK, maybe that's just me.

The other day I was flipping through a book about London when I came across an event called “The Great Stink of 1858.” Since there is a part of me that is an unreconstructed middle school boy, I had to read what this was about.

Basically, the growth of London during the 19th century led to a massive sewage problem that cause several outbreaks of cholera. Most scientists back then believed that cholera was spread through the air—through the smell they called “miasma.” In an attempt to get rid of the odor the government required all cesspits to be drained and allowed to run into the River Thames. Needless to say, this not only killed anything in the river that wasn’t already dead, but it also created an enormous problem of, well, a great stink.

Worse, the resulting outbreaks of disease killed tens of thousands of Londoners, and threatened to make the city unlivable.

Enter Joseph Bazalgette. He was an engineer who had worked on London’s train system, and he was chosen to solve the problem. His plan, based on the idea that cholera was spread by smell, was to build a sewer system that would carry London’s crud far beyond the city limits so they wouldn’t have to smell it anymore.

When planning the network he took the densest estimated population, gave every person the most generous allowance of sewage production and came up with a diameter of pipe needed. He then said ‘Well, we’re only going to do this once and there’s always the unforeseen.’ and doubled the diameter to be used. As a result, the massive pipes he build in the mid-1800s are still in use today—still big enough to take every bit of London’s waste product and deliver it to where it can be treated.

Now what Bazalgette and his partners didn’t know was that cholera wasn’t spread through odor at all, but through contaminated water supply. But by taking London’s sewage away from the sources of drinking water, he was able to eradicate cholera from the entire region.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

This is such a powerful moment in Jesus' ministry. Peter, who had denied Jesus three times before the crucifixion, is cornered by his master and forced to re-commit himself to the gospel. John the gospel writer knows exactly what he's doing here. His readers know about Peter's denial, but they also would know him later as the leader of the church. It was crucial to include this event in order to show that Peter had been restored to his place as a leader in the early church.

But those are just the details. This is also an enormously emotional story. Peter, in front of his friends and partners, has to confront his sin and answer the resurrected Christ. He answers the first time, but Jesus keeps going. You have to wonder at this point if Peter thought Jesus was going to ask him this question all day. In the end it's just the three times—one for each denial—and by the third time Peter was feeling uncomfortable and wounded by the questions.

This is really a story about grace, about God's freedom to forgive anyone for anything—about his power to clean up any mess no matter what kind of smell it gives off.

Maybe that's what Joseph Bazalgette and the London sewerage system teaches us about the grace of Jesus Christ. The real achievement of Bazalgette's design is that it was big enough to dispose of whatever crap London could throw at it for more than 150 years...and counting.

God's grace is like that, too. What Jesus reveals to us in his interrogation of Peter is

the depths and lengths and limitless nature of his grace toward us.

This passage helps us understand the capacity of God's grace to get rid of the junk in our lives—the waste product that keeps us from becoming healthy people—whatever it is that keeps us from functioning sometimes as a healthy church.

Jesus looks Peter in the eye and asks “Do you love me?” over and over again. “Do you love me?”

It sounds so simple, but don't be fooled into thinking this is one of the easy questions in our series.

Jesus looks Peter in the eye and asks “Do you love me?”, and in one single question he makes Peter decide if he wants to give his life as a disciple or if he wants to remain broken and lukewarm on the outside.

The key to these questions is found in the answers Peter gives.

Yes, Lord, you know that I do.

Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

Lord you know everything—you know that I love you.

It's Peter's answers that open the door for Christ's cleansing, restoring grace. It's Peter's confession that he loves Jesus with all his heart that makes his reconciliation and restoration possible.

In the end, Jesus looks at each one of us and asks us if we love him. He asks us again and again, even when it makes us uncomfortable—even if it hurts our feelings.

Jesus asks us if we love him, and if we do then we answer as Peter did: Yes, Lord, you know that we do. Yes, Lord, you know that we love you. Lord you know everything—you know that we love you.

And if that's true, then Christ's grace is sufficient to handle anything we need to get rid of in order to move ahead.

And if that's true, then we enter into a new way of living—a life of answering God's invitation to serve and love and sacrifice as he calls us to do. That's what we're celebrating on this very special Sunday. [Note: On this Sunday we celebrated four baptisms, welcomed a group of new members, and commissioned a short-term mission team for trip to Israel.]

Some have heard the call to be baptized and commit themselves to becoming disciples of Jesus Christ.

Others have taken the next step and come for membership, publicly professing their faith in Christ and their commitment to this church.

In a moment a group of people will stand up here and ask for your prayers as they hear God's call to serve on a short-term mission project in Israel.

All of these are examples of an answer to the "Do you love me?" question that Jesus asks all of us.

But the power of the question isn't really just the asking of it. The real power of this question is unleashed when we answer as Peter did: Yes, Lord, you know that we love you. Lord you know everything—you know that we love you.

That simple response of acknowledging that we know who we are and whose we are releases a power that we can barely begin to understand.

The grace that God offers through Jesus Christ is the lifeblood of this church and of every person who wants to live as a disciple. It is through that grace that we are transformed into the people who will accomplish God's work in this place.

Chris Wright, the worldwide director of John Stott Ministries, said: "I may wonder

what kind of mission God has for me, when I should ask what kind of me God wants for his mission.”

We become the people God wants for his mission when we decide to live differently because of our love for Jesus Christ.

The question is on the table: Do you love him? All that’s left is to give your answer.