

“Did you find what you were looking for?” The checkers at Safeway often ask this question, but this time the checker said it with more of a smile than usual. You see, I had just done the shopping for my Christmas Open House. The grocery cart was so full I could hardly steer it! So she could pretty much predict my answer as she asked, *“Did you find what you were looking for?”*

Confidently, I said: Yes. But that confidence proved misguided. Not that my answer was wrong. The question itself was wrong. What she should have asked – or what I should have asked myself – was: *Did you look for everything you need?* Because the answer to that turned out to be a resounding: *No*. Picture the scene. I’m in my kitchen, right in the middle of making something, and I look in the cupboard for an ingredient I need. Thought I had that. But it’s nowhere to be found. Have to go back to the store and get it. Then a little while later I’m in the middle of making something else and start looking for another ingredient. I was sure I had that. But I can’t find it, either. So now I have to go back to the store again. Then, still later, this happens again. And again. And again. And again. It got to the point where the clerk started joking, *“See you in a little while!”* And sad to say, she did see me in a little while! Bottom line, it really would have helped if I’d asked myself early on: *Am I looking for everything I need?*

Now, this is not just a good question for cooks to ask. I mention it because it’s a good question for life in general. *Am I looking for everything I need?* Or better yet: *Am I looking for what I most truly need?* As human beings, it is natural to look for whatever we think will enrich our lives. And as the years go by, we often find what we’re looking for. A loving spouse to raise a family with. A career that’s satisfying *and* pays the bills. A certain amount of respect. Fun times with people we like. The list could go on and on of things we look for in life. And they may all be good things. But even if we do find them, the question still remains: *Am I looking for what I most truly need?*

This is especially important to ask in our spiritual life. To have a life worth living, a life that fulfills our potential, a life that will stand the test of eternity, we need to ask ourselves early and often: *Am I looking for what I most truly need?* Not just what other people are looking for. The crowd is rarely a good judge of what’s important. Not just what my flesh and fantasy desire. That’s likely to be superficial at best! No, am I looking for that which alone can fill the empty places in my heart, that which alone can give me true security and hope, that which alone can release me from past failures and free me for whatever the future holds? Above all else, am I looking for what I most truly need?

Now, you may think this an obvious question for any Christian to ask. But actually it’s not so obvious. Many Christians feel it’s enough to avoid looking for the wrong things in life. They ask: *What shouldn’t I do? What shouldn’t I say? What shouldn’t I think? What shouldn’t I desire?* But my friends, that’s only half

the job – and not even the best half. Avoid sin? Sure, but God has more in mind for us than keeping our noses clean. The goal is to seek and find what we most truly need and make the most of it. That is God's will. And because it is, we must not overlook this question or treat it as obvious.

Jesus sure didn't. In fact, the first direct quote from His ministry is the question: **“What are you looking for?”** He asks it of two young men who were following after Him. They *had* been disciples of John the Baptist, but when John pointed out Jesus as the long-awaited Savior, these two went off to find out more about Jesus. The Lord knew what was on their minds, of course, and what was in their hearts. But it wasn't enough for just Jesus to know this. These two men needed to be aware of it, too. So Jesus asked them, **“What are you looking for?”**

Their response may sound terribly mundane. **“Rabbi, where are you staying?”** They just wanted to know where Jesus would be so they could come to Him and get to know Him. But this response at least made their motives clear. For you know, there are many *false* reasons for following Jesus – motives that have more to do with getting what we want than with finding what we truly need. These two men had the right motives. As a result, they did find what they most truly needed. But that didn't *have* to be the case. Often it isn't.

For instance, when Jesus asked, **“What are you looking for?”** what if they had said: **“We're looking for answers”**? Answers to all life's puzzling questions. In tough times, people often turn to religion for answers. And actually, that can be a good thing to do. The Bible is full of answers, full of God's answers. The trouble is, they're not always answers people want to hear, and not always the answers to questions people are asking.

Take the question *“Why?” Why did God allow this? Why didn't God do that?* They're not likely to find an answer to this question even though it's frequent and often rises out of deep loss and pain. Why no answer? I'll give you my best guess. Because the question is not very helpful – especially over the long-haul. Even if one did get an answer, it wouldn't undo whatever happened, whatever caused the pain, and wouldn't that just pile disappointment on top everything else? It's an illusion to think that just knowing why would somehow make things better. And if I may be very frank, let me also point out that sometimes this question can hide a hint of spiritual arrogance – a spiritual grudge – like: God has messed up, and before He can expect me to trust Him, He owes me an explanation. Now, why would God want to encourage an attitude like that by giving an answer? I suspect He wouldn't. Of course, this is just my guess.

What I know for sure is that it's easy to get stuck picking at this question why. I've seen plenty of examples. And what I also know is that we can get on quite well without knowing why. One excellent example is a church custodian named Lee. By the time I got to know him, he had become a “can-do” kind of guy. In fact, Lee was kind of amazing, because he was able to do everything required of

him with only one arm. I don't remember how he lost the arm. I think it may have been cancer. But I do remember him telling me how bitter he felt when he lost it – and long after. “*Why me?*” became his constant refrain, and it had really poisoned his attitude. That, of course, made it even harder for him to find work. For who wants to hire someone engaged in a perpetual pity-party? It also made it harder for him to keep friends. It even poisoned the atmosphere at home – to the point where his *wife* started asking, “Why me?”

Naturally, I asked him when his attitude changed, and he couldn't pin-point a specific moment, but somewhere along the line he got sick and tired of feeling sorry for himself. That's when he finally turned to the Lord for help. He figured: *This “why-me-stuff” is a dead end. And honestly, I don't need to know why I lost my arm. What I need to know is how to cope. How do I move on and make the best of the life I've got?* Well, the Bible offered lots of answers to that question! For instance, you know how I often quote the verse, “**My grace will be sufficient for you**”? I got that from Lee. Another of his favorites was, “**I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.**” That was key! Once he stopped focusing on what he *didn't* have and what he *couldn't* do, he discovered all kinds of abilities in himself – and all kinds of resources in God. Even with just one arm his life became truly abundant. What's more, Lee became quite a witness to God's power and possibilities. Like I said, he was pretty amazing. But none of this would have happened had he not finally asked himself the right question – not “*Why me?*” but “*Am I looking for what I truly need?*”

So this bring us back to Jesus' question: “**What are you looking for?**” Lee's example shows we don't really need all the answers. So as a second option, what if these two men had said: *We're looking for solutions?* This, too, is a common reason why people turn to religion. Life isn't going well. They hope something spiritual can make it better. So they're very practical: *I don't need to know why things happen. I just want to get rid of my problems. I'm looking for solutions.*

Now, just like with answers, Christianity offers some great solutions to deal with life's problems. I'll bet most all of us could share how God helped us through a tough time. But here again, God's solutions are not always the kind people are looking for. Trust, obedience, repentance – they're great, but they're not quick and easy. Prudence, perseverance, prayer – they're great, but definitely not magic. Plus, these are God's solutions, not quick fixes. They promote God's agenda, not our own. So is it any wonder that some people try out religion, dabble in it for a while, then give it up when it doesn't deliver the quick fixes they've looking for? If only they realized God offers them more help than they're looking for – help in becoming the amazing people God means them to be. That is why Phillips Brooks wrote: “*Do not pray for an easy life; pray to be a stronger person. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for power equal to your tasks. Then the accomplishing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle.*” Great, huh? But it doesn't make sense at all if you're just looking for

is a quick, easy, magical solutions. It only makes sense if you're looking for what you truly need.

So again we come back to Jesus' question, "**What are you looking for?**" And if we've crossed out needing to know all the answers or getting easy solutions, here's one more thing these men might said: *I'm looking for inspiration*. I'll never forget the words of a woman who had joined one of those power-of-the-mind "churches" so popular where I used to live. She told me point blank, "*I ask very little of religion. I don't need someone to tell me my duties. I don't need someone to tell me how to get saved. What I need is something that makes me feel good inside, something that buoys me up and balances out all the negative stuff in life.*" That's what *she* was looking for, and while most wouldn't put it that bluntly, I suspect many more people are looking for the same. Religion as good feelings. Religion as a spiritual high. Religion as just inspiration.

Now, don't get me wrong! I have nothing against inspiration. Believe it or not, I even hope you'll get some when I preach! But it cannot be the goal. Feeling good, getting a spiritual high – that cannot be the goal. First of all, life just isn't like that. Even for Jesus it wasn't. Even before the cross. Read the Gospels. Along with the joys and miracles, he felt hurts and frustrations – often anything but inspiration. And if that's how it was for Him, why would we expect otherwise?

Plus, think what we're doing when what we mainly care about is how religion makes us feel! Or for that matter, when we mainly care about it giving answers to our questions or magic solutions to our problems! What we're doing is making religion all about me – my feelings, my wants, my desires, my conditions. Me, me, me! And if that's my spiritual agenda, if religion is all about me, then that's all it is: religion. It's not faith, not faithfulness, and certainly not a relationship with the Lord. Just religion, and a false one to boot. Truth be told, it's idolatry, self-worship. And my friends, that's what we need to be delivered from – the worship of my feelings, my desires, my conditions; the worship of me, me, me. That's what we need to be delivered from. It's not what we most truly need!

No, those two young men in our text had it right. What we most truly need is what they were looking for: *Jesus Himself*. Their actual words may sound mundane – "**Rabbi, where are you staying?**" – but with these words they were telling Jesus: *We want to be where You are*. *So that we can learn from You, so that we can follow You, so that we can depend on You and belong to You, we want to be where You are. Regardless of whether it makes us feel good, or exempts us from problems, or answers all our questions, we want to be where You are, Jesus. We want a personal relationship with You.*

And my friends, when Jesus asks us, "**What are you looking for?**" can't we say the same? Can't we say that, above all else, we want a personal relationship with Him? That is what we most truly need. Remember: the Christian life is not a treasure hunt for easy answers, quick fixes, and pumped up emotions. It is a

battle – a battle against Satan, sin, and self; a battle to remain faithful unto death so that we receive the crown of life. And remember, too: we're battling an enemy who fights dirty. The tempter knows how much our hearts crave answers, solutions, good feelings. He knows it so well he tries to tempt us with cunning fakes – with answers, yes, but false ones; with solutions, yes, but phony ones; with good emotions, yes, but fleeting ones – knowing full well that they cannot provide what Jesus can. But we know this, too. Only Jesus can provide the forgiveness of our sins. Only Jesus can provide the power to change. Only Jesus can bring growth out of hardship, strength out of struggle, wisdom out of pain. And most of all, only Jesus can give us eternal life as a gift of grace. Both here and hereafter, only Jesus can give us what we most truly need.

In the midst of battle, it's easy to lose sight of this. That is why Jesus asks us again today, **“What are you looking for?”** And what can we say but: *“It's You, Lord. You're what I most truly need”?* *Like the two young men who first answered this question, I want to be where You are, Jesus. In my thinking, in my feeling, in my desires, in my actions, I want to be as close to You as possible. I want to know You as much as possible. For Jesus, You are what I most truly need! Amen.*