

Life's Most Important Questions

INTRODUCTION

Websites for commercial enterprises often have a section for “frequently asked questions.” By clicking on a link one can find detailed information about various products or services provided by the company.

Have you ever considered the most frequently asked questions in your home? They might include:

- “Are we there yet?”
- “What’s for dinner?”
- “How do I look?”
- “What time is it?”
- “Where did I leave my phone/glasses/keys?”

These are rather mundane and incidental questions, though they may be extremely important for the moment. There are other questions that rank among the most frequently heard, the simplest, and yet most profound inquiries about life.

- Who are you?
- What are you doing?
- What is your goal in life?

These queries, or variations of them, were addressed to John the Baptist. His answers give important insights to profound issues in life.

I. WHO ARE YOU?—A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

John 1:19–23 describes a scene where religious leaders inquire about John’s identity. (Read the text.)

“Who are you?” is a question about identity—how you see yourself and how others should regard you. The challenge is that we all have many identities and how we answer the question depends on where we are and who is asking. The question can be answered in so many ways—based on gender, age, ancestry, nationality, citizenship, job, education, accomplishments, relationships, possessions, or position.

John’s answer came not from his ancestry, his family, his education, his citizenship, or his hobbies. His identity was found in his calling: I am a messenger for God! This realization formed the foundation of his life, his behavior, and his habits.

No doubt, like us, John had many other identities too. But the dominant identity which shaped and prioritized his life was the simple realization that he was a messenger for God.

Why is identity so important? When a person is lost in the wilderness the most important question is “Where am I?” When a person is lost in life the most important question is “Who am I?”

We solve life’s moral, ethical, and behavioral questions based on how this one question is answered. Identity issues in life abound. You find them in the political arena (illustrate with names of political parties), in the religious realm (illustrate with names of

various religions), and in the social fabric of the community—rich/poor, foreigner/native, youth/elderly.

What mother has not heard a child voice this identity-based response: “Mom, I need those jeans. All the kids in school are wearing them. If I wear what you like, I’ll look weird!”

The Bible reveals that great moral issues have been resolved on the understanding of one’s identity:

- Moses (Read Heb 11:24)
- Joseph (Read Gen 39:9)
- Paul (Read 1 Cor 3:3–4, 9; Phil 3:20)

We live in a media-saturated society with influencers all around us who market ideas that shape our attitudes about ourselves, our values, our behaviors, and our use of resources. One of the most urgent issues in life is just this simple question: “Who are you?” How do you define yourself? What identity provides the ethical and moral basis for your lifestyle?

II. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?—A QUESTION OF MISSION

The Pharisees didn’t understand who John was nor did they comprehend the reasons for his actions. So, they asked him: (Read John 1:25).

The religious leaders noticed that John lived and behaved differently from them. They wanted to understand who he was and why he was acting the way he did. John’s response to their question revealed the commitment that prompted his actions and way of life.

John’s work, his mission, was to bring attention to Jesus. For John, the question “What do you do?” is not a question about action; it is a question about intention.

The challenge to the church through all centuries has always been to keep the focus on Jesus. Church history, even our own, has too often been a story of doctrinal debate—this formulation of truth and correction of that error. Attention has been directed to standards and boundaries and when these become the central focus, they always bring imbalance. We need to learn how to make Jesus the center, then all the boundaries will find their proper place. John’s mission was to point to Jesus.

Mahatma Gandhi, from India, once observed that if Christians would be like Jesus the whole world would be Christian.

“What are you doing?” is not just a question about the activity of the moment. It probes into the defining purpose behind all that we do. And the challenging question for every follower of Jesus Christ is, “Does my life bring positive attention to Jesus?”

John’s sense of *identity* enabled him to solve moral and ethical challenges. His sense of *mission* released him from the prison and pressures of local culture. He was not concerned about fashion in clothing, diet, or lifestyle. He was an ambassador for the King

of kings, and he followed a lifestyle that enhanced his message.

Now the question is, “How does this affect an individual and the church?” A person without a sense of identity and mission is going to become a victim of the prevailing culture in which he lives.

“What do you do” is a probing question about purpose in life. What is it that you are striving to accomplish? Are you investing your energies in something worthwhile or in something as fleeting as a soap bubble?

III. WHAT IS YOUR LIFE GOAL?—A QUESTION OF PRIORITIES

John’s own disciples became anxious about John’s future as the popularity of Jesus increased. Though they did not ask a straightforward question, you can clearly hear it in this dialogue: (Read John 3:26–30).

The ministry of Jesus and John overlapped for a time. For a while John had been the center of attention. People flocked to hear him. He was just reaching full stride when Jesus began His ministry—and then people began to go to Jesus instead of to John. Jesus was becoming more popular than John.

How easy it would have been for John to feel injured, neglected, threatened, and forgotten. John didn’t fall into that trap. He had settled the question of what was most important in life. For John, that most important thing was the kingdom of God, and therefore he could joyfully say, “He must increase but I must decrease.”

CONCLUSION

John was prepared to play a subordinate role. In his view it was a noble thing to serve God where you are. If you are a tax collector, be a good one. If you are a janitor, do your job to the glory of God. If you are a teacher, a secretary, or a receptionist—view your work as ministry for God. Whether you are in the limelight or in obscurity it makes no difference, for a God-given task of any size is a noble calling. If God wants to use you, He doesn’t need to give you a position of leadership.

The subtle question that lay behind the questioning of John’s disciples was really this: “What ultimately concerns you? What are you spending and being spent for? What cause consumes your life?” These are questions for us today—when it is so easy to commit our lives to finite things of transitory worth.

The life of John the Baptist teaches us how to live in two worlds—how to cope with a world in which we are aliens until we reach the home where we have our citizenship. Life’s biggest questions are character questions involving identity, purpose, and priorities. **ED**

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