

Questioning Jesus

Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?

What must I do to inherit eternal life? Are you the king of the Jews?
Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? When will this be?
Is it I, Lord? What will be the sign that this is about to take place?

Lord, will only a few be saved?
Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?
Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?

Small Group Study Guide

Lent 2019

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INTRODUCTION

In the Gospel of Luke, the evangelist gives us a rich and lengthy account of Jesus and his disciples making their way to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, during which Jesus will be arrested and crucified. One of the recurring themes of this so-called “travel narrative” (9:51-19:28) is Jesus responding to questions that are put to him by various figures in the story -- his disciples, members of the crowd that is often gathered around him, and even his dear friends.

During Lent, we will explore the questions that people put to Jesus while he is on the way to Jerusalem in Luke 9:51-19:28. Pastor Davis will preach on the texts in which we encounter these questions, and Dr. Shane Berg will lead adult education classes on these texts.

Small groups will focus on these texts in a way that encourages participants to reflect deeply and personally upon them and even to wrestle with them. The goal is to engage the text each week in a way that shapes and nurtures our own faith in the safe, welcoming context of a small group. There is then the opportunity to hear that same text taught in Sunday School and preached in worship the following Sunday.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Participants in small groups can prepare for the discussion by reading the material and text in advance, although this is not necessary for participation.

If you are unable to attend a small group or the adult education class, you can use this guide each week to prepare to hear the sermon in worship on Sunday. It is also available on the Nassau Church website. You can read the text and discuss the questions together as a family or couple. Want to discuss it with others and not leave home? Set up a group with friends online and stay in the comfort of your own home at any hour you select.

Leaders of small groups, see the end of this guide for suggestions and reminders about leading small groups in general and this series in particular.

However and whenever you enter into this study, bring your own questions. May your faith increase even as you find new questions in these Bible passages.

WEEK 1

“Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

When the disciples' request to the leaders of a Samaritan village to provide hospitality to Jesus is rebuffed, they want Jesus to authorize divine punishment against its residents. How will Jesus deal with their righteous indignation?

Read the Text: Luke 9:51-56

Going Deeper into the Text

1. We are told that Jesus “set his face” to go up to Jerusalem. With some help from Isaiah 50:7 and Ezekiel 21:1-2, what does this expression suggest about the nature of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem? It may be instructive to look at Luke 9:57-62 as you respond to this question.
2. Jesus sends his followers into a Samaritan village in anticipation of passing through it or perhaps even staying there. The Samaritans were a people living in the territory between Galilee and Judea and were related to the Jews both ethnically and religiously. But this kinship resulted not in friendly relations but rather hostility. See, for example: Matthew 10:5; John 4:9; John 8:48. But Luke tends to portray the Samaritans more irenically, as we will see next week when we read the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. Given this history of hostility between the Jews and Samaritans, how do you interpret Jesus' intention to pay a visit to the Samaritan village?
3. The Samaritan villagers reject Jesus because “his face was set toward Jerusalem.” Scholars differ in their attempts to explain this rationale for refusing to receive Jesus. What do you think might have motivated the Samaritans to refuse to receive Jesus?

Questioning Jesus

In light of the refusal of the Samaritans to offer Jesus hospitality, James and John ask Jesus if he will authorize a vengeful response: punitive fire from the heavens that will consume the offending village. Jesus responds by rebuking his zealous disciples and simply moving on to another village.

- What do you think drove James' and John's question to Jesus?
- Why does Jesus reply as he did? Before coming to a snap judgment about Jesus' response, read Luke 10:1-16.
- How do Jesus' words in Luke 10:1-16 (especially verses 10-12 and 16) shape, if at all, your understanding of Jesus' refusal to engage the Samaritan villagers?

Questions for Reflection

- The desire for revenge comes in many shapes and sizes. When are you most tempted to seek revenge?
- Based on our readings and discussion, how might you respond the next time you feel you have been treated unfairly?
- What from this discussion do you want to continue to ponder?

WEEK 2

“Who is my neighbor?”

When confronted by a pointed question from a religious scholar, Jesus does not engage in an academic debate but rather tells a story to make his point. How will Jesus’ poignant story about helping a wounded traveler bring the brash scholar to a more humble posture?

Read the Text: Luke 10:25-37

Going Deeper into the Text

1. A “lawyer” stands up to “test” Jesus. A “lawyer” refers to a scholar of the Mosaic law who could offer authoritative opinions on what it meant to obey God’s commandments in daily life. His status as a scholar and his address of Jesus as “teacher” suggest we about to witness a scholarly debate. Why do you think he wishes to “test” Jesus?
2. The lawyer’s question — “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” — is a fairly stock question in Jewish academic circles. Jesus responds with a question (a common rhetorical strategy in such debates) that requires the lawyer to summarize the law’s teaching on inheriting eternal life. His answer combines Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9, a famous passage that Jews call the “Shema,” which is the Hebrew for the first word of the passage (“Hear!”). By what is obedience to God chiefly measured according to the words of Moses here? Then read Leviticus 19:17-18. In its context, who is a “neighbor”? Look also at 19:33-34 as you address this question.
3. The lawyer’s scriptural answer satisfies Jesus the teacher, and Jesus praises him and encourages him to live out what he has said. This could conclude the episode. Both Mark and Matthew contain similar encounters (though with some fascinating differences) between Jesus and religious authorities that end with the affirmation of the “great commandment;” read Matthew 22:34-40 and Mark 12:28-34. But for Luke, the exchange is only beginning.

Questioning Jesus

The lawyer is not satisfied with Jesus' affirmation of his answer. We are told he wanted to "justify" himself.

- What do you think this impulse implies about how the lawyer has experienced this encounter with Jesus?
- Why does the lawyer press on?
- What is at stake for the lawyer?

His question — "And who is my neighbor?" — prompts Jesus to change his rhetorical tack. Rather than responding with a counter-question or a scriptural proof, Jesus instead tells a story. The road from Jericho (well below sea level) to Jerusalem (several thousand feet above sea level) required travelers to pass through the barren Judean wilderness and was notorious for attacks by robbers and bandits.

- What does Jesus' parable about the indifference of religious leaders and the compassion of a despised enemy teach the lawyer about being a "neighbor"?
- Imagine the posture, tone, and countenance of the lawyer at the beginning of the encounter; how do you think it has changed by the end?

Questions for Reflection

- If you were writing a contemporary version of this parable, who would you cast as the "good neighbor"?
- What message does this parable have for the church?
- What implications does Jesus' question — "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" — have for us, individually and as a nation, today?

WEEK 3

“Do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?”

When Jesus is enjoying the warm company of two sisters who are his dear friends, one of them becomes quite frustrated that she has been left to do all the work of hosting while the other enjoys conversation with Jesus. How will Jesus respond to Martha’s complaint that she is working while her sister is relaxing?

Read the Text: Luke 10:38-42

Going Deeper into the Text

1. The Gospel of John suggests Jesus had a close relationship with these sisters. Read John 11:1-44 and John 12:1-3. Some scholars think Luke is presenting a different pair of sisters, but it is perhaps more likely that John had access to a more detailed source about the sisters. At any rate, it is important to note the prominence of women generally in the ministry of Jesus. Women are among his disciples in Galilee; read Luke 8:1-3. They accompany him to Jerusalem and remain with him until the bitter end; read and compare Luke 23:49 and Mark 15:40-41. And women are the first to provide a witness to his resurrection; read and discuss Luke 24:1-10. What roles did these women play in Jesus’ ministry and as his disciples?
2. The Christian tradition has been a bit hard on Martha in this passage for being “distracted by her many tasks” instead of sitting at Jesus’ feet like Mary. Is it fair to critique Martha for attending to the work of the household?

Questioning Jesus

Exasperated by being left to carry out the duties of the household on her own, Martha directs a pointed question to Jesus: “Do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?” She tacks on an imperative: “Tell her to help me.”

- How is it possible to be both sympathetic to Martha and yet question whether she allows herself to be captive to the “tyranny of the urgent”?

Jesus’ response to Martha is not harsh (the repetition of her name signifies tenderness). His observation that she is “worried” and “distracted” anticipates language from Jesus’ teaching in Luke 12:22-34.

- How does that passage help us understand what Jesus is trying to get across to Martha?
- Read Luke 15:11-32, the famous parable of two brothers. What comparisons can be drawn between Martha and the older brother?

Questions for Reflection

- Gender aside, do you identify more with Mary or with Martha? How so?
- In your relationship with Jesus, what distractions pull you away from him?
- Sit quietly for a moment to think about your close relationships—family and/or friends. When or how do they support or distract from living as Jesus’ disciple?
- How can you use relationships with family and friends to grow in faith?

WEEK 4

“Lord, will only a few be saved?”

During one of Jesus’ teaching sessions, a question comes to him from the crowd about the extent of God’s saving mercy. What will we make of Jesus’ seemingly callous and unsettling answer?

Read the Text: Luke 13:22-30

Going Deeper into the Text

1. In this passage, Luke has stitched together and edited prophetic utterances of Jesus that are found in various places in the other gospels. To get a sense of this editorial work read the following passages: Matthew 7:13-14; Matthew 7:21-23; Matthew 8:5-13; and Mark 10:31. What theme emerges when Luke ties these disparate sayings together?
2. What do you notice about the shift in metaphors between Luke 13:24 and 13:25? What is the literary effect of the combination of the two metaphors?
3. Read Luke 13:29 and then Psalm 107:1-9. Does the Psalm help shed light on our attempt to understand 13:29-30?

Questioning Jesus

The leading figures of the Protestant Reformation--Luther, Calvin, Zwingli--looked to the apostle Paul for the fundamental insight our salvation depends not on works but on faith in Jesus. Jesus' words here and in many other places in the Gospels seem to stand in tension with this central theme of the Reformation by suggesting that our behavior determines whether we will be able to enter through the narrow gate and be saved. One possible conclusion we might draw is that one cannot reconcile Jesus and Paul. But that is not the view of the Reformers nor those of us who descend from them.

- If we assume the intent of Jesus' words is not to suggest salvation is limited to a select few who can please God through their actions, then what do we imagine is the reason for Jesus to employ such stark and foreboding language and images in his teaching here and elsewhere?
- Why would Jesus respond to an earnest existential question -- "Will only a few be saved?" -- in such a grim way?

Questions for Reflection

- What do these shocking words from Jesus mean for your daily struggle to follow him?
- How do you interpret these words in a multi-faith culture?
- How do you reconcile these words to ecumenical efforts with Jews and Muslims?

WEEK 5

“When is the kingdom of God coming?”

When Jesus is asked by a group of Pharisees about the time when God’s kingdom will become manifest, Jesus replies with a cryptic speech filled with references to what will transpire when the “Son of Man” appears. How will we unpack and understand this striking and somewhat odd response?

Read the Text: Luke 17:20-37

Going Deeper into the Text

1. The question about the kingdom of God comes from the Pharisees. Look at Luke 5:21; 5:30; 6:2; 10:29. How would you characterize the Pharisees intent when they approach Jesus in Luke’s Gospel?
2. We encounter in this passage several references to the “Son of Man.” Jesus quite often in the Gospels uses this enigmatic term to refer to himself. For examples in Luke, take a look at 5:24; 6:5; 9:22; 9:26; 11:30; 12:8-10; 12:40.
 - What sort of roles and function are associated with the “Son of Man” as Jesus uses it?
 - Jesus seems to have taken the term from Daniel 7:13. Read the vision of judgment in Daniel 7:9-14. Does reading the “Son of Man” passages from Luke in light of Daniel 7:13 shed light on why Jesus adopts this term to refer to himself?

Questioning Jesus

The question the Pharisees pose to Jesus concerns how one will know when the Kingdom of God will arrive. Behind the Pharisees' question is the traditional Jewish understanding that the Kingdom of God would manifest itself in the form of the liberation of the Jewish people from their foreign overlords, regaining the land God had given to Abraham and his descendants, and enjoying God's reign as in the time of the judges and the kings. But Jesus comes preaching a very different manifestation of the Kingdom of God. Read Luke 6:20; 8:1-3; 9:1; 10:8-12; 11:20; and 12:32-34.

- For Jesus, when and where is God's Kingdom?
- What is its character?
- Why are the Pharisees flummoxed by Jesus' teaching about God's Kingdom?

Questions for Reflection

- When and where have you had glimpses of God's kingdom?
- What role do you think Christianity/the church/Nassau Church has in helping others discover or experience the kingdom of God?

WEEK 6

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

When a wealthy leader of the community asks the deeply existential question about how we might live eternally with God, Jesus’ reply brings him not comfort but rather discouragement. How will we grapple with this stark answer from Jesus from the context of our privilege and abundance?

Read the Text: Luke 18:18-30

Going Deeper into the Text

1. The word “ruler” here implies not a secular official but more likely a member of the Sanhedrin, the body of Jewish leaders who were given some oversight of Jewish affairs by the Roman governors. What makes this question more interesting or significant because it comes from such an official? Consider this question in light of some other occurrences when Luke uses the term “ruler:” Luke 14:1 (where translators of the NRSV render the same Greek noun “leader”); Luke 23:13 and 35 (again, translators render the Greek noun “leaders”); and Luke 24:20 (again, “leaders”).
2. Luke’s source for this story can be found in the Mark 10:17-31. The two accounts are quite similar but not identical. Look at Mark 10:21 in comparison with Luke 18:22. What detail in Mark is absent in Luke? How does it change the dynamics of the story in Luke?
3. Read the two passages that frame the story of the rich ruler--Luke 18:15-17 and 18:31-34. What are the themes of those passages? What is the effect of “sandwiching” the encounter with the rich young ruler between them? How do the framing passages help inform our understanding of “entering the kingdom of God?”

Questioning Jesus

The first time Jesus is asked the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”, it comes from a religious scholar and initiates a scholarly debate (Luke 10:25-37). But in this instance, the questioner is a layperson and there is a more personal and existential cast to the exchange.

- What do you think the man was seeking from Jesus?
- Why does he ask Jesus this question?
- Keep in mind the appropriateness of the ruler’s response that he has kept all the commandments since his youth. There is nothing arrogant or unreasonable about this answer in a Jewish context, and Jesus seems to accept his response as sincere and credible.

Questions for Reflection

- Pretend that you are in the group with Jesus. Based on our discussion, how do you think you would respond to the conversation between the ruler and Jesus?
- Now change the context to a contemporary one at church in which you overhear this conversation between a pastor and a church leader. How might you react? What conversations might it prompt with other church members?

NOTES FOR LEADERS

Leading a small group is not quite the same as leading a Bible study. While the goal of a Bible study might be to increase biblical knowledge, the primary goal for a small group is to deepen relationships among the participants as each one grows in relationship with God and Jesus and as Christ's disciple. For these Lenten small groups, the content to assist in meeting this goal is from the Gospel of Luke.

At the first gathering, take time to review the group covenant important to small groups at the end of this guide. Invite the group to add to the covenant.

A simple process for each week could be:

- Ask a get-acquainted question (see below).
- Prayer
- Present the topic for the entry meditation (see below).
- Read or invite a group member to read the Bible passage aloud.
- Read and discuss the questions in "Going Deeper into the Text."
- Read and discuss the questions in "Questioning Jesus."
- Discuss one or more questions for reflection.
- Invite prayer requests and close with prayer.

Get-acquainted Questions

To help the participants get to know each other better, and especially if anyone in your group doesn't know the other participants, invite everyone to answer a question at the beginning of each gathering. Suggested questions are below, but feel free to come up with your own.

- Week 1: What first attracted you to Nassau Church?
- Week 2: If you could vacation anywhere during the month of March, where would you go?
- Week 3: Where did you live during your elementary school years?
- Week 4: If you could be any non-human animal in God's creation, what would you be?

- Week 5: What was your favorite subject in high school?
- Week 6: What kind of music do you enjoy the most?

Entry Meditation

Group members come after a full day of work, activity, and other concerns. To encourage them to leave the day behind and to think about the theme or dominant subject of the biblical passage, provide an entry meditation. This can be a time to think silently, an invitation to those who wish to respond, or pairs can talk together. The intent is to prepare the participants for the coming discussion rather than for everyone to hear each person speak to the group.

- Week 1: Recall a time when your community, region, or nation called for revenge against a person or group.
- Week 2: Call to mind people who are your neighbors because they live near you.
- Week 3: Think of an occasion (recent or long past) when you felt put upon or burdened by something you had to do.
- Week 4: Recall conversations, interviews, or news broadcasts over the past several weeks to remember a comment that implied that someone was not worthy of receiving help.
- Week 5: Bring to mind a hope you have for the future.
- Week 6: Ponder your station in life and the power and privileges it gives you.

May leading your small group during Lent be a joy and a spiritual discipline that forms and strengthens your faith.

GROUP COVENANT

- ❖ **What happens in the group stays in the group.** To build and maintain an atmosphere of trust, confidentiality is essential.
- ❖ **Speak and make space for others to speak.** Each voice is important. If you are usually quiet, make an effort to offer your thoughts. If you speak out easily, hold back for others to speak or invite someone who hasn't spoken to speak.
- ❖ **Stay with the group.** Physically, be present at each gathering rather than treat attendance as just another option. Mentally, listen to others and participate.
- ❖ **Focus on ideas, not the person.** If you disagree, disagree with the idea, but don't belittle the person.
- ❖ **Speak from your own awareness.** When offering an opinion, claim it as your opinion rather than make generalizations.
- ❖ **Everyone in the group is a learner.** In a small group, there are no experts. Learning is a lifelong process.

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