

Asking for a Friend

Week 1: We Have Science, Do We Still Need Religion?

Matthew 16:1-4

We're kicking off a new series today called Asking for a Friend, and over the next few weeks, we're going to be exploring responses to some questions that, maybe we're afraid to ask, but we're curious about.

And this phrase, "Asking for a friend," has become a way for us to ask a question that maybe we don't really want to admit that we have. It creates some separation between us and the question because we might be a little embarrassed by it. And so, we might ask...

- "How do you get rid of a rash that you got from using a cheap laundry detergent? I'm just asking for a friend."
- "Is it okay to re-gift something if you don't really like it? I'm asking for a friend."
- "Is it illegal to download a movie if you've already paid to see it in the theaters? Just asking for a friend."

By adding, "Asking for a friend" we get the info we're looking for without fully revealing our concerns. Maybe keeping a little plausible deniability! But, I imagine for many of us, we have some deeper questions we want to talk about, but we're a little afraid of what others may think if we do. Questions like...

- "Is it okay to have doubts about God, even if I've...I mean, a person...has believed for years? Asking for a friend."
- "What should you do if praying and reading your Bible feel like a chore? Asking for a friend."
- "How do you forgive someone who really hurt you and you don't want to forgive them? Asking for a friend."

I think the reason we don't ask these questions in the Church, or we veil them as if they're from someone else, is because we don't know how people will respond. Or we DO know, and so we just avoid bringing them up. We're afraid that asking these kinds of questions will leave us feeling judged and rejected. We're afraid of disappointing God or someone else. We're afraid that if we crack the door of doubt by asking a question about faith, all the skeletons in God's closet might come pouring out.

And so, often times, our appropriate questions with reasonable answers go unasked. And so, in this series, we're going to look at three questions that maybe you've been afraid to ask, but are curious what the response would be. Today, we're exploring the question, "We have science, do we need religion anymore?" Next week, Matt Nussbaum will be looking at the question, "Does it really matter what you believe as long as you're sincere?" And then we'll wrap up on September 8th with "How can a loving God send people to Hell?"

Each of these questions may cause us to squirm a little...they do me!...but each of them have reasonable responses. And, I think when we see that, it makes us more confident in our faith, maybe helps us when someone works up the courage to ask us a question like this. But it also makes us more confident to ask questions like these because we see there might be some reasonable answers out there for them.

So, today, we're looking at that first question..."We have science, do we need religion anymore?" Our text today is Matthew 16:1-4, so if you have a Bible or a Bible app you like to use, turn there with me.

I think there are a lot of reasons why people over the years have been afraid to ask this question, and it really comes down to the way that we have pitted science against religion...(show picture). We've made them enemies going to battle against one another and we've forced people to choose their side. And when we do, we deify our side and vilify the other.

And people on both sides criticize one another. One side says if you follow the science you have to leave behind your faith and the other side says if you follow your faith, you have to leave behind your brain. But what if we have created this false dichotomy between faith and science? What if, instead of "either/or" there's actually room in the conversation for "both/and"? That both science AND faith have value and they help us make sense of the world around us. They help us understand who we are and where to find what our hearts long for.

I think Jesus affirms the place of both science and faith in our text today and that he'd say, "You don't have to choose." Let's look at it together. It's only four verses, so I'll read it and then we'll take it apart piece by piece before putting it all together to see what it means for us...(READ Matt. 16:1-4)

So, in verse 1, we find Jesus being questioned by these two religious groups, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. These guys were enemies on everything else, but when it came to Jesus, they always found a way to team up against him. And they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. A sign that would prove to them once and for all that He was the Messiah. He was God's Chosen One sent to usher the Kingdom of Heaven to earth.

And they'd already asked him to do this earlier in chapter 12. They've already seen him do all of these miraculous things. But they want more proof. And, here's what I find interesting...throughout Jesus' life, he was super welcoming of questions. Part of the reason I think it's good and right for us to ask spiritual questions is because of the way we see Jesus address the questions people had for him. He did it with grace and compassion.

But with these guys, Jesus was exhausted by them. They were asking the question, but they didn't care about the answer. There was nothing he could say or do that would give them what they were looking for. In Mark's version of this account, he says that Jesus "sighed

deeply.” He knew what they were doing. He says...(READ vs. 2-3a, end with “appearance of the sky,”)

Jesus is like, “You want a sign? You want proof? Use the scientific methods you already know how to use!” They knew how to predict the weather based on scientific observations. Observations we still rely on today. When I look outside and see a red sky, I can’t help but say to myself, “Red sky in the morning, sailor’s take warning. Red sky at night, sailor’s delight.” They knew what they could know about how the universe worked based on scientific observation.

In a way, Jesus is affirming the science of their day. He didn’t say, “Stop following science and start following me.” Like we have to choose. Instead, he says, “Take what you know from science and let it point you to me.” Think about all the things you are seeing. The people being healed, the lives being transformed, God being worshiped. Think about what that could mean and if it all points to me being the Messiah.

When I was serving at our church in Rhode Island, there was a guy named Wayne Bowen (show picture) who played drums on our worship team. He, and his wife, Barbra, led a Connect Group. Wayne is a professor of Biology and Neuroscience at Brown University in Providence. An Ivy League school. He’s brilliant. Has more letters following his name than I have in my name.

During most of the time I knew him, Wayne led advanced research on sigma receptors, these membrane proteins found in tissue cells throughout the body. He was especially interested in how these proteins reacted in cancer cells. He thought if they could learn from that, then maybe they could stop those cancer cells from multiplying and spreading throughout the body.

I remember talking to Wayne one day about this idea of how what we know from science pointing us to faith instead of away from it. Pointing us to God. He told me two things that I’ll never forget. First, he said that of all the molecular biologists that he works with throughout the world, he can only think of two who consider themselves atheists. Everyone else believes in some kind of Intelligent Designer. It may not be the God of Christianity. They may not be followers of Jesus, but when they look at the complexities of this world, they conclude Someone is behind all of this.

Then he told me, “Shawn, I’ve been studying the same protein for over 26 years and I STILL find out new things about it all the time. And that’s just a single protein. It all makes me go, ‘God, You are amazing!’”

Wayne is a leading scientist in his field and he doesn’t feel like following the science means he has to leave his faith behind. He certainly doesn’t believe that following Jesus means checking your brain at the door when you come into a room like this. For Wayne, the

science of it all points him to Jesus, not away from Him. And it leaves him in awe of who He is.

The scientific process helps Wayne see Jesus for who He is. And I think that's what Jesus wants for these religious leaders, but he know it's not what they want. He says...(READ vs. 3b-4, start w/ "You know how to interpret...")

What does He mean by "wicked and adulterous generation?" Jesus often used marriage language to describe his relationship with the Church. He is the groom, we are the bride. But, what we see happen throughout the Old Testament is happening here. These religious leaders, part of the bride that was to be united with the groom, they'd turned their back on Jesus. They had rejected him.

It's not that they wanted another sign, it's that they wanted another Messiah. All the signs and miracles Jesus had performed, that they had seen, it all pointed to him being the Messiah, they just wanted a different Messiah. They didn't want a Messiah that served the poor, welcomed sinners and outcasts, stood up for the foreigner. They wanted a Messiah that defeated their enemies, not prayed for them. They didn't want a Messiah that says take up your cross and follow me. Lay down your life to find it.

And because their hearts longed for another, they missed who Jesus was, even though all the evidence pointed to Him. It's not that they couldn't see it, it's that they didn't want to see it.

And I think, so often, that's what happens when it comes to this discussion about faith and science. When we pit them against each other, we've already drawn our conclusions and then we just look for evidence to support what we already believe. And it doesn't matter what we see, or observe, or discover.

I think it all just requires a lot of humility. Humility to sometimes look at scientific discoveries and go, "Wow, God. That's how you did it!" To learn from our scientific community and allow it to increase our faith instead of shake it. And to have the humility to say, "You know, there are some things in this world that science can't touch and explain." We all put our faith in something. I think there's really good reason behind putting our faith in Jesus and following him.

And so, how can we do that in a community or academic setting that sometimes challenges what we believe? Writes us off as simple or naïve? I think first, Engage with Humility and Respect. Instead of seeing people or professors as the enemy and debates as battels to win, look at them as opportunities to listen and ask questions. Look for open doors to meaningful conversations and then model the character of Christ when you do.

Second, **Become a Student of Apologetics**. That doesn't mean learning how to apologize for what we believe. Apologetics is learning how to graciously defend why we believe what we believe and helping others see that there's reason behind our faith.

There are so many incredible resources out there to help you in this. Two of my favorites...**The Reason for God by Tim Keller and The Problem of God by Mark Clark**. If you want to dive deeper into some of the questions we'll be looking at in this series or others that you have, these two books are great places to start. And they both do a fantastic job of diving deeper into this topic of faith and science.

Finally, **Connect in Community**. This is one of the reasons why we offer Connect Groups here at Sherwood Oaks. Connect Groups give us a faith community where we can wrestle through these kinds of questions together. Instead of "asking for a friend," we can ask our friends. We can support and encourage one another as we live out our faith. Check out this video...**(Connect Group video)**

We want everyone at Sherwood Oaks to experience community like that and so we have groups for everyone. Stop by Connect Gathering on Sept. 8th to find your group!

I'll close where Jesus closes. The Pharisees and Sadducees, they wanted another sign, but Jesus says the only one you'll get is the sign of Jonah. He's pointing back to Jonah who spent three days in the belly of the fish and he uses it to point to his own death, burial, and resurrection. Two intellectually absurd events.

I think our text reminds us today that science has its place, but it's not sufficient to grasp the full reality of this life. Just like the Pharisees and Sadducees were able to interpret the signs of the sky, but missed the signs of the times, we can do the same thing. We can get lost in the pursuit of knowledge and miss the deeper truths that point to Jesus. And the sign of Jonah, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, it stands as the ultimate revelation of God's power and love...and it's a sign that transcends the limitations of our scientific process and understanding.

Today, I just want to invite you, for the first time or the next time, to put your faith and trust in Jesus. He is Lord of creation, but He also wants to be the Savior of your soul. He invites us to follow Him. And when we do, we don't have to leave our brains at the baptism. He calls us to love Him with our heart, souls, and MINDS.

In a world that values knowledge over wisdom, may we choose to build our lives on the firm foundation of Christ, who offers not just answers to life, but life itself.