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## Sermon

### **Unquestionable Answer: Unanswerable Question**

**Matthew 22: 34 - 46**

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What a delight to have two celebrations in one service! Joy and laughter will always be a part of our Faith. It is an added delight to see little ones joining us in worship. They can be a great deal of fun usually to the embarrassment of the parents, but what a joy to have them here and to celebrate the presence in our midst of a new member of the community.

To be initiated into the Community of Christ Jesus as a little child is controversial. Many Christians think that only adults or at the least those who can make their own profession of Faith should be baptized. Our Church disagrees.

One major reason for the Baptism of children in Christian families is that it is God who takes the initiative in restoring the relationship that we humans broke. The center of the Gospel is that God is FOR people and earnestly desires that the broken relationship be restored. In the face of ignorance, resistance, refusal, and outright hostility from human beings God took the initiative.

In Baptism we celebrate that great truth. Before we did anything, God acted. Before we knew anything God the Holy Spirit was at work in our lives. Before we decided to say yes to Jesus, Jesus had already said yes to us. Before we did anything our parents and many others had been praying for us. The initiative was not ours.

As an apprentice electrician we were often sent to repair things in the local Catholic Church in Lyttleton the port of Christchurch. The Nuns at the Convent always welcomed us and used to give us an excellent morning or afternoon tea. How many of those women of God prayed for us I will never know this side of Heaven, but one thing is certain that they would have. God takes the initiative.

My father's death was unexpected, and I had the task of informing my friends. One of the closest was a girl who was a friend. She told me later that after I left her office, she prayed for me asking for special help because she knew I could not cope with this on my own.

I asked for none of this. This was God taking the initiative through His people. A few months later I met the girl who led me to Christ Jesus. When I said yes, a month or so later, it was to a God Who had been at work before I knew anything about it.

An infinitely more important story is that of C S Lewis. He had the sense that he was being pursued by God. Here is how he put it in his book "Surprised by Joy". "You must picture me alone in my room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted for even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him who I most earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon

me. In the Trinity term of 1929, I gave in and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." God initiates.

So, we celebrate with the family this morning as we see enacted before us the God of Grace once more taking the initiative and claiming this little one for Himself. There will come a time when a decision will have to be made. If the Parents and God Parents have bathed this little one in prayer and have faithfully shared with them all that they know of God, then there is every potential for this little one to say yes.

How may we and this family be prepared for such a vital task? For that we must now turn to the two stories we read from St Matthew's Gospel. (Matthew 22: 34-36)

Once again, we see the drama coming to its climax. For some days Jesus has been responding to attack after attack from the religious authorities. In Chapter 22: 46, they were looking for a way to arrest Him, stopped only by their fear of the crowds. In 22: 15 the Pharisees laid plans to trap Him in His words. In 22: 23, That same day the Sadducees came to Him with a question. In verse 34 the Pharisees wade back into the fray. This is where we pick up the story. Both vignettes we read gave us the central message that these parents and all of us need to be teaching our children. The first teaches us how to behave towards others, the second tells us about the kind of God we serve.

The question is put to Jesus NOT to get an answer but to see if He could be tricked into giving an unwise response. The Jewish teachers had identified 613 commandments, and many debated which were the most important. It is a dangerous thing to get into debate with a lawyer over which laws are more important than the others.

Our Lord's response is a masterpiece. The first commandment is recited every day by devout Jews right up to the present day. This places God first in importance every day. "Here O Israel: The Lord is our God the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." No one could question that answer. The lawyer would have been impressed.

But Jesus goes on to add another command, this time from Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Then He adds, "on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." This means that all other laws are derived from these two. All the other commands are not nullified by these two but are to be understood in the light of these two.

There are two errors that can come from this. Love can be reduced to sentimentality and the God of the Bible is portrayed as someone too nice and caring to ever turn people away or judge them.

The other is to remove all feeling from the word love so that God becomes cold and heartless lacking any sense of compassion or understanding. "Just do as you are told and don't expect too much help from me in doing it". Or perhaps even worse, "You are hopeless useless and no good but despite that I love you." God's love is reduced to an act of the will with no feelings attached at all.

Helping children find a way to love passionately while not descending into sentimentality is no easy task. Neither is it easy to teach your children to take control of what they feel without completely suppressing their emotions altogether.

It isn't easy for us(!!) but that is what we will learn if we are diligent in our prayers and in our obedience. We are promised the help guidance and presence of the Holy Spirit and we know (or very soon learn) that this is a life-long and at times painful journey. But when we get it right as we will with God's help the sense of joy and intimacy with those closest to us is a glimpse of the heaven that awaits us. When this happens with colleagues at work there is a real sense of being a community and the same applies when we are in that community called Church. In whatever sphere of life harmony like this feels like heaven has opened and we experience a glimpse of the eternity.

Jesus has given an answer that no one can question. Now He turns the tables on His opponents and gives them a question that they cannot answer. (I am indebted to N.T. Wright for this insight. See his commentary on Matthew Volume 2 page 93.)

Jesus is quoting from Psalm 110 which became a favorite text for the early Church as it grappled with the question of who Jesus is. It is a question we need to present to our children always assuming that we have answered it for ourselves first.

Children will get this answered more by what they see than what is said. Is Jesus first and foremost in your family? Is attendance at worship with the people of God central to your weekly routine? Does your life reflect the values of the Kingdom of God or is your Faith a Sunday thing that has no effect from Monday to Saturday? Do the children KNOW that Jesus is Lord of your household?

Ultimately though the growth of your child in the Faith will depend on you and how you have answered these two questions in the Gospel for today. What is the greatest commandment? Is Jesus for you? Is He Lord of all your life? Our children are watching us all the time to see whether we behave the way we believe.

That is the challenge for all of us. That is what it means to be the parent of a child who has been baptized.