



## WHEN HOW QUESTIONS GO BAD

*Jeff Peabody  
New Day Church  
Federal Way, WA  
June 3, 2007*

This is our final week in our series on New Day's vision and values. I hope it's been helpful for you. It's always good for me when we revisit them. It gets me fired up once again about what we're doing here. Like I've said before, I don't have any interest in just playing church. If we're going to invest the time in being here, let's know why.

It's also family Sunday this morning, and I know the kids haven't been in on the whole series, so we need to do some recapping for them this morning. So to bring everyone up to speed, we're going to play a game called Guess My Value.

I need two families to volunteer. Here's how it works: I'll give a clue and each family will get a turn to guess which value I'm talking about. Each family can also choose one helpline family to turn to if they need it.

1. What value do you get when you combine honoring God with a university in Ellensburg?
2. If I'm a terrible liar, maybe this value is in my future.
3. We come here to get what we need to go back out because...
4. This is true no matter whether you're a student, a mom, a programmer or a pastor.
5. No fake smiles here, please.
6. If this one is right, the winning team better give the losing team a hug.
  1. Worship is central.
  2. Truth must be well told.
  3. The church is a mission outpost.
  4. Every Christian is a minister.
  5. Authenticity rules the day.
  6. The church must lead the way in love and reconciliation.

Today we're looking at value #7 – the Who question outranks the How question. What in the world do we mean by that?

I once had a summer class in seminary with a professor named James Torrance who was visiting from Scotland. He had this thick Scottish brogue, and it was fun to hear him say words I'd never heard, like foedus and perichoresis. The way he said them made them sound like magic spells from Harry Potter or something. One day he made the passing comment that churches are normally preoccupied with how questions when they should be focused on the who question. Who is our center?

Now that sounds really abstract, until you put it in the context of relationships. Did you ever see the old movie Fiddler on the Roof? It's the story of the milkman Tevye. All five of Tevye's daughters are growing up, falling in love and getting married. Tevye's own marriage to Golde had been an arranged marriage – they met for the first time on their wedding day. So at one point he asks her, “Do you love me?” She says “Do I what?” And when he persists, she says, “For 25 years, I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow. After 25 years, why talk about love right now?”

The focus for their entire relationship hadn't been their relationship at all – it had been about raising kids and doing what was needed to survive. They were entirely wrapped up in how questions. The more important question, “Do you love me?” Didn't even get asked.

Christianity is all about a love relationship with Jesus, but there's so much to get done to be a church. It takes a lot of coordination and administration. Keeping the organization running is a constant job. And the how questions keep coming. How will we reach out to our community? How will we meet all the needs? How will we afford to do that? As those questions press in, it's easy for churches to forget who we're doing all their activity for. It makes me think about what Jesus said to the church at Ephesus in the book of Revelation:

**Revelation 2:2-5**

*I see what you've done, your hard, hard work, your refusal to quit. I know you can't stomach evil, that you weed out apostolic pretenders. I know your persistence, your courage in my cause, that you never wear out.*

*But you walked away from your first love — why? What's going on with you, anyway? Do you have any idea how far you've fallen? A Lucifer fall! Turn back! Recover your dear early love.*

Last week we said nothing we do matters without love, and that doesn't just apply to our relationships with other people – it's about what we're doing for God as well. This value forms a bookend with Value #1 – Worship is central. It's intended to help us remember to keep the focus on Jesus instead of on whatever task is in front of us.

That sounds great in theory, but it's incredibly difficult to live out. We've got to get things done. What's the standard for knowing if we're TOO focused on the job in front of us? How do we measure how vs. who?

There's a very familiar little story in the book of Luke that can help us out.

**Luke 10:38-42**

*As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"*

*"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."*

Poor Martha. One little incident and she's gotten 2000 years of bad press. Here she was, just trying to serve a nice little meal and everybody's picking on her. Didn't the Lord need to eat? What could be more giving, more sacrificial for this woman, who probably wasn't rich, than to graciously offer to feed Jesus and his hungry disciples?

Let's correct a few misperceptions here. We've got to give her a little credit. In the first place, it isn't as if Martha didn't care about the Lord. Sometimes the way people talk about Martha you'd think she didn't love Jesus as much as Mary, but that's not what this passage is saying at all. Luke tells us this was Martha's house. She's the one who made the decision to have Jesus over in the first place. She wanted to do something nice for him. When their brother Lazarus died, it was Martha who showed solid belief in Jesus.

We know Jesus liked a good meal and understood what went into preparing it. The Pharisees called him a glutton he liked food so much. He pulled together the details for the last supper with his disciples, so he appreciated the fact that food doesn't just cook itself. Luke says Martha was working on the preparations that HAD to be made. It wasn't frivolous stuff she was working on.

That's why I think this is such a good story for this particular value. Because it's clear that the "how" questions were important

Still, Jesus does seem to be putting Martha in her place. So what was it that went wrong?

At several points in the gospels, we're told that Jesus knew what somebody was thinking. And at this dinner with Martha, he reads her heart as well. He sees what is driving her decision making process. The attitude behind her actions indicated that some how questions had gone bad. They had begun to take over.

The same signs that show up in Martha are ones that we can serve as red flags in our lives as well. When we begin to notice them, we can know that the how questions have taken over. Let's go back and look at the story again.

*As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.*

The first evidence we get of any problem is that Martha was having

### **Trouble Hearing**

Mary was listening. Martha was distracted. She was counting place settings. She was trying to make sure she had enough matza balls in the soup. Whatever. The task was preventing her from paying attention to what Jesus was saying.

The word for distraction there is really an old fashioned word that says she was cumbered. Anybody know what it means to be cumbered? It means loaded down. Have you ever seen in the movies where they're having a party, and someone says to each of the guests, "May I take your coat please?" Pretty soon, that person has a pile bigger than them. They can't see and they're about ready to fall it's so heavy. That's what it's like to be cumbered.

Martha has so much on her mind that she's no longer a part of the conversation. She can't tune in to Jesus. There's too much in the way.

What sorts of things get you cumbered down? Let's list some examples.

We all have had times when we get like that, when the craziness of life is pushing us so hard that we can no longer hear what Christ is saying. It's a sure sign of how questions gone bad.

Martha didn't like being in that spot. She recognized her own stress. And that led her to talk to the Lord about it.

*She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"*

Do you ever get annoyed when people don't pick up on your hints about just how angry you are? Sometimes I feel like every pore of my body is communicating my emotions, and it turns out nobody is even paying attention. It sounds to me like Martha's in that frame of mind. This has been bugging her and nobody seems to notice. And what that does is cause her to begin

### **Second-guessing God**

"Don't you care, Lord? You must not, because I know that if you really cared, you wouldn't ignore this situation. You would see things exactly as I see them – with completely objective, unbiased clarity. Then you would do exactly what I think you

should do – smack my sister upside the head in Christian love and tell her to get to work.”

Since the “How” isn’t going the way Martha planned – nobody’s helping her! – she concludes God doesn’t love her. That wasn’t the situation at all, but that’s the only thing that made sense to her when her how question was all she could think about.

Have you ever felt that way? “God must not love me or he wouldn’t have let this happen.” “If God loved me, he would do something to change my situation.”

Pretty much most of the time, I think that God and I see things the same way. I think that God must want the same things I do, that he and I feel the same way about events in my life. It’s always a good reminder for me to go back and read Isaiah when I start to feel that way. God is talking and he says this:

### **Isaiah 55:8-9**

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

When we’re stuck on the “how” of things, we bring God down to our level and try to force him to do things our way, to be “how” we want him to be. We question God’s motives when he doesn’t do things our way. But God is above that. We can’t second guess his intent, because the way he operates is so far above our way of thinking.

Look one more time at what Martha said to Jesus:

*She came to him and asked, “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”*

As you can see, it isn’t just Jesus who Martha is second guessing. You don’t have to read between the lines to see that she’s not very happy with Mary either. Martha is feeling overwhelmed by her workload and sees Mary sitting there doing nothing, and she begins to feel angry and resentful. It’s Mary’s fault that Martha’s life is hard.

One of the sure signs that we are too wrapped up in the how questions is when we start

### **Blaming other people**

I’m guilty of this one. I can remember many times at the ad agency being on a really tight deadline and seeing other people who had plenty of time. Forget the fact that I’m a terrible delegator and I hadn’t even assigned anybody anything they could actually do. I just compared their lack of business to my overwhelmedness and I would get frustrated. I created the problem myself, but I managed to find a way to blame other people for how I felt.

Ever since Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent, people have been pointing fingers. When it comes to problems, we look for a cause outside ourselves. We don't want to recognize that we've brought our own dilemma on ourselves, so we start looking around for who else might be responsible.

Martha was the one who opened up her home in the first place. She was the one who had control over what this meal needed to look like. Nobody had asked her to do anything – it was all self generated pressure.

In his response to Martha, Jesus doesn't allow her to dump the blame on Mary. He sees that something else is really going on.

*"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things."*

More evidence that we're too focused on the how questions shows up in the form of

### **Emotional Stress**

Do any of you kids ever cook your own mac and cheese? Sometimes when I've gone to make some, I've grabbed too small of a pot for all the water and noodles. What happens when you do that? It bubbles up and over the sides.

Mary's kind of like a pot that's too small. Jesus uses two words to describe her. She's worried, or full up with cares, and she's upset or agitated. The heat's been turned up and everything inside her is being stirred up, and there's too much for her to take. So it all comes out.

Our emotions are an excellent gauge of where our heart is. They may not always be reliable for making decisions, but they clearly reveal what's going on inside us. And when we find ourselves overly anxious and annoyed, it could mean that we're too focused on the wrong thing.

It's not that the feelings are wrong – they're actually a God-given thermometer to warn us of danger. We shouldn't feel guilty about feeling stressed. We should take it seriously and get to what's going on.

As Jesus looked at Martha he could see what was going on. He said to her, "You're worried about many things. But there's really only one thing you need to be concerned about." Her mind was occupied with more than it could handle.

This week, since it was so hot, we cleared out a spot to put up our swimming pool again for the summer. I always have to cut out the grass for that, or it will stink like a barnyard when we take down the pool. So I had about filled our yard waste bin with grass and dirt. Then, in a story we don't need to explain, it got knocked over.

The problem was, once it was down, there was no getting it back up. It was way too heavy. So what I had to do was bring the wheelbarrow over and unload a bunch of dirt out of the bin. Once I had lightened it, I could get it up and moving again.

Jesus tells Martha and each of us that our load is too heavy. We need to move from the many to the one.

What are the tasks in our life that have us emotionally overloaded and stressed? Do we feel like we have a choice as to whether or not we do them, or HOW we do them? Christ would have us re-examine our own hearts and minds, to see what is causing our anxiety. Maybe something we're trying so hard to do is not as high on his priority list as it is on ours.

Jesus follows up his statement to Martha with a side commentary about Mary:

*Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*

Mary could have decided to set the table. Instead she decided to listen to Jesus. It was a matter of choice. Jesus seems to imply that Martha also had a choice, and her choice had been to focus on the "how" of getting everything ready.

Sometimes, when how questions go bad, it's really a matter of

### **Avoidance**

We said at the beginning that being too focused on task can make it hard for us to really listen to Jesus. But sometimes we choose the task because we don't WANT to listen to Jesus. There are days when I will find any excuse to not sit down and pray or read my Bible. There's always so much to do, I can justify that choice. Incidentally, those days usually end up being more stressful than the days I do stop and try to listen to God.

The truth is, we can find ourselves all wrapped up in the how because that's where we want to be. It's too hard to hear what Jesus has to say. We don't know if we want to really listen. So it's easier to stay busy and preoccupied.

Meanwhile, as all this has been going on, Mary has been quietly sitting, soaking in every word Jesus has to say. Jesus said she had chosen what is better. Another translation says she had chosen the good portion.

A lot of times at night, my kids will read before going to bed, and when I go in to tell them it's time to stop, do you know what they say? "Oh! I was just getting to the good part." You know that feeling – when you're right at that point in the story when something important is happening and you don't want to stop. So most of the time I give in and let them read a bit longer.

Jesus tells Martha, “Mary’s right at the good part. I’m not going to stop her. Important stuff is going on here that she doesn’t want to miss.”

Listen to these words from Psalm 73:

**Psalm 73:26,28**

*My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion forever...as for me, it is good to be near God.*

God himself is the good part. He’s our portion.

In his book, *Jesus of Suburbia*, Mike Erre shares an illustration that I think is so good. He tells the story of a friend of his who took his five year old son to Disneyland for the first time. How many of you have been there before? Well you might remember that just inside the front ticket gates is an area where you can take pictures. Sometimes Disney characters come through and say hello. You can see the Disneyland Express going by. The actual park itself is beyond the train, but the little boy didn’t know that.

So when Mike’s friend tried to move away from the Disney characters and take him into Disneyland itself, he screamed and yelled, because he was sure his dad was taking him out of the park. And Mike Erre writes,

*Imagine the joy and thrill when his dad dragged him around the corner into Disneyland itself and he realized what he thought was the park wasn’t the park at all, but only the beginning. Imagine the joy of knowing that you have all day to explore this place with your dad.*

We have a father who has so much more to offer us. There’s so much more to see and know than we will ever find when we stop with the how questions. God wants us to get to the good part, to get to where we stay focused on Jesus himself.

It’s like the words from that old hymn:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,  
look full in his wonderful face,  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim  
In the light of his glory and grace.*

As we come to communion this morning, it’s a chance to turn our eyes on Jesus. We can put the rest of life aside for a moment and spend some time really taking him in and focusing on all he’s done for us.

As we do that, the importance of all the how questions begins to fade. And when that happens, our load starts to lighten, our stress level goes down and we find a general sense of relief. Author Ruth Myers says,

*Praise can free you from wasting your energies...speculating on just exactly HOW each circumstance in your life could be part of God's plan. Through praising and thanking God, you put your stamp of approval on his unseen purposes. You do this not because you can figure out the specific whys or hows, but because you trust his love and wisdom.*

Here is a list of a few how questions.

How am I going to...

- Repair this relationship?
- Pay these bills?
- Be happy again?
- Move past my mistakes?
- Forgive this hurt?
- Get everything done?
- Change the way I am?

Take a good look at them and see if any of them look familiar to you. Then as you get ready to share in the Lord's supper, just pray to him and offer him your how questions as a sacrifice to him. Just say, "God, I don't know how you're going to do it, but I trust you to take care of me. I give you my questions. I want to rest in you."