

Theme: Better not Bitter

“Becoming Better Through Being Curious Like Jesus”

Sermon by Tami Bradshaw Huber, July 26-27, 2025, at Summit Church, Durango

Hello, my name is Tami. I often get introduced as Pastor Jeff’s wife, but I like to say that Jeff Huber is **my** husband. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in worship this weekend. I pray that the stories, scriptures and ideas that I share with you today will both challenge and encourage you in your walk of faith. This is the second week of a sermon series called “Better not Bitter.” I will be sharing some thoughts about how considering the questions Jesus asked in the gospels can help us keep our hearts open and soft instead of cold, shrunken and hard.

Those of you who have been married know that marriage can be an expansive opportunity to practice the skills of becoming better not bitter. Next month Jeff and I will be married for 34 years.

GRAPHIC: Jeff and Tami leaving wedding ceremony

Don’t we look happy in this photo? Just before this picture was taken, we were declared husband and wife. Then Jeff turned and started walking down the aisle to the exit without me! I had to run in that big poofy dress to catch up with him. Then I grabbed his arm and said, “Hey don’t forget me!”

There have been many moments since this picture was taken that I feel like I’ve gotta run to catch up with Jeff and remind him not to

forget me. I share Jeff with a lot of people, and he can be easily distracted.

One of the most challenging aspects for me as a Pastor's wife is not getting to spend Christmas with extended family. I know I am not alone struggling with sadness and loneliness during the holidays. That time of year bitterness can rise in me and threaten to overcome my spirit. Yet I also know that with God's help, moving through those painful emotions will eventually allow God to reshape my heart for good.

There is a poignant piece of literature that I love about a person's transformation from bitter to better: You might know the book; it's called "How the Grinch Stole Christmas."

GRAPHIC: Cover of "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas"

The story begins: "Every Who Down in Who-ville liked Christmas a lot...but the Grinch who lived just North of Who-ville did Not! The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season! Now, please don't ask why. No one quite knows the reason. It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right. It could be perhaps, that his shoes were too tight. But I think that the most likely reason of all may have been that his heart was two sizes too small.

But, whatever the reason, His heart or his shoes, He stood there on Christmas hating the Whos. Staring down from his cave with a sour, Grinchy frown at the warm lighted windows below in their town."

Bitterness has a way of shrinking and hardening our hearts. Bitterness isolates us from the connections of community. God calls us out of bitterness and despair into the light of his love.

Last week Jeff shared the practices of worship and prayer to help us become Better not Bitter. Today I want to share a practice of Jesus I have not heard talked about a whole lot. In the gospels, Jesus modeled the spiritual practice of asking questions. Jesus' questions from the Bible challenge us, open us up, and help us become the people God calls us to be. The questions Jesus asks are never just small talk or filler; they're meant to help us look deeper and connect with God in a meaningful way.

GRAPHIC: Jesus is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus asked and the 3 He Answered

Recently I have read the book Jesus is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered by Martin B. Copenhaver. Before becoming the president of Andover Newton Theological School, he was a parish pastor. In the introduction to his book Copenhaver writes, "Contrary to how Jesus is often portrayed, he does not offer spiritual tips. He does not give us a neat list of ten ways we can be closer to God. He does not provide easy answers. Instead, he asks hard questions. In that he is like the Zen master who takes us beyond the obvious to something deeper. He is like Socrates, who taught the people simply by asking probing questions. He is like the prophets, who railed against the ruling authorities and sought justice by asking challenging questions."

"The most powerful questions Jesus asked are the ones that invite us to go deep into our own minds and hearts for a response. These are the hardest questions to answer, and they are the ones that can be most transformative": Asking these questions can help us become Better not Bitter.

SLIDE: “Who do you say that I am?” (Luke 9: 18-20)

SLIDE: “Why are you afraid?” (Matthew 8:23-27)

SLIDE: “Why are you anxious?” (Luke 12:25-31)

SLIDE: “What do you live for?” (Mark 8:34-38)

SLIDE: “Whom will you love?” (Luke 6:27-36)

SLIDE: “What are you looking for?” (John 1:35-38)

In the Meditation Moments for this week, you will be able to spend a day with each of these questions. For today, we will just look two of the questions Jesus asked. First let’s look at what is perhaps the most important question for followers of Jesus to consider is, “Who do you say that I am?” Let’s look at Luke 9:18-25.

BIBLE: Luke 9: 18-25 The Message

¹⁸ One time when Jesus was off praying by himself, his disciples nearby, he asked them, “What are the crowds saying about me, about who I am?”

¹⁹ They said, “John the Baptizer. Others say Elijah. Still others say that one of the prophets from long ago has come back.”

²⁰⁻²¹ He then asked, “And you—what are you saying about me? Who am I?”

Peter answered, “The Messiah of God.” Jesus then warned them to keep it quiet. They were to tell no one what Peter had said.

²² He went on, “It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the religious leaders, high priests, and religion scholars, be killed, and on the third day be raised up alive.”

²³⁻²⁷ Then he told them what they could expect for themselves: “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat—I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, *my way*, to finding yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you?”

I want to point out that at the beginning of this text we read,

SLIDE: “One time Jesus was off praying by himself,”

Before Jesus ask the disciples anything, he prays. Let’s take a moment to imagine that. What do you think Jesus’ body looked like when he was praying? Was he seated cross legged? Was he on his knees? Were his hands folded, his eyes closed? Maybe his hands were up and extended out. I wonder if there were words he spoke in the quiet of his mind or if he simply soaked up God’s love and creative power. However Jesus was praying, his questions for the disciples rise out of the prayer.

The first question Jesus asks is a warmup question. It’s the kind of question I would ask at the beginning of a small group discussion or a spiritual direction session. It’s meant to create an environment of curiosity. Jesus asks, “What are the crowds saying about me, about who I am?” The men who are following Jesus offer up a few ideas;

some people say that you are John the Baptist, and some say that you are Elijah or a prophet.

Then Jesus goes deeper. I imagine a dramatic pause and Jesus looking into the eyes of the disciples before he asks, “And who do **you** say that I am?”

SLIDE: Who do *you* say that I am?

(Big Pause)

As a Spiritual Director I ask a lot of questions. Sometimes that makes people squirm a bit. And honestly some questions make me squirm too-it can feel there is an expectation to give the one and only correct answer. When I ask a question in the context of spiritual formation settings I am not hoping for the “right answer”. I am hoping that the question will be pondered and puzzled over. I want to know what the answer is for that unique individual on that particular day. I want to explore what my companion is learning about themselves and about God. I believe that deeply pondering questions is an important way we learn and grow in our relationship with God.

It's Peter who answers Jesus' question of “Who do you say I am?” Peter responds, the “Messiah of God.” Notice that Jesus does not say, “That is exactly right, Peter!” Instead, he asks his apprentices to keep Peter's answer to themselves. Peter's answer is “right” and yet it is not complete. Peter does fully understand what his answer, “You are the Messiah” means. Who will Jesus be to Peter when Jesus is in Roman custody, just before the rooster crows? Who will

Peter say Jesus is as he hangs on the cross? Who will Jesus be for Peter after the resurrection?

GRAPHIC: Questions Jesus Asked book cover

In his book, *Questions Jesus asked*, Magrey R. DeVega writes, “If all that mattered was answering Jesus’ questions correctly one time, then Peter had it made. He aced the test. He would have graduated into full discipleship. But there was much more that he had to discover. It’s one thing to demonstrate what one knows about Jesus. It is quite another to discover who one is in relationship to Jesus every day. That matter requires regular, daily examination over a lifetime of exploration. It can even expand and change over time.”

Jesus’ question “Who do you say that I am?” is a question it will take our whole life to live into. It’s a question worth considering again and again.

An old story tells of a rabbi living in a Russian city a century ago. Disappointed by his lack of direction and life purpose, he wandered in the chilly evening. With his hands thrust in his pockets, he aimlessly walked through the empty streets, questioning his faith in God, the Scriptures and his calling to ministry. The only thing colder than the Russian winter air was the chill within his soul. He felt so enshrouded by his own despair that he mistakenly wandered into a Russian military compound off limits to civilians.

The bark of a Russian soldier shattered the silence of the evening chill. “Who are you? And what are you doing here?” “Excuse me?” replied the rabbi “I said, ‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’” After a brief moment, the rabbi, in a gracious tone so not to provoke the soldier, said, “How much do you make every day?” “What does that have to do with you the soldier retorted. With the delight of someone making a new discovery, the rabbi said, “I will pay you the equal sum if you will ask me those same questions every day: “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Following Jesus’ example of being curious and asking questions can renew our sense purpose and meaning.

Just a few days ago I learned that a dear friend of mine lost her husband suddenly and traumatically. She is devastated. Her heart is shattered. I wonder who she understands God to be right now.

It seems to me that we are most vulnerable to becoming bitter after a devastating loss. In the book of Ruth, Naomi suffers the death of her husband and sons. She tells the people around her to call her Mara, which means bitter, because she thought the Lord had abandoned her. Tremendous loss can make us question who God is and wonder if God really loves us. Jesus himself asked, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Eventually Jesus says, “not my will, but yours be done.” Jesus moves to a place of surrender. Somehow it seems that asking honest questions of God is a catalyst for growth and change. Curiosity

creates the space in our hearts for God do God's healing and transforming work.

Let's return to our bitter friend the Grinch. Questions are what lead to the transformation of the goofy green guy. When the Grinch hears the Whos in Whoville singing on Christmas morning, he takes a pause. He becomes curious, and he takes a new look at his assumptions. With courage the Grinch hangs out in a place of uncertainty and allows his heart to grow. The Grinch becomes better not bitter.

VIDEO: The Grinch

**“And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow,
stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without
ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes
or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if
Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if
Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.”**

— Dr. Seuss, How the Grinch Stole Christmas!

What if there is more that God desires for us?

Questions are powerful. They remind us that we don't have it all figured out—and that's okay. Questions get us thinking, spark new ideas, and help us check in with what's really going on in our hearts. In our walk with God, not every question has to be answered right away. Often, just sitting with a question can help us change and grow.

Jesus was the best at this. He didn't just hand out answers. Instead, He asked questions that made people stop and think, guiding them to discover the truth on their own. He invites us to do the same.

When you came in today you were given a card. (Explain the Card)

SLIDE: Examen Card

An Examen for today

1. Are you aware of God in this moment?
2. What are you grateful for right now?
3. When did you experience love today?
4. Was there an opportunity in which you missed sharing love with others?
5. What might you learn from that? (Tell God about it.)

SLIDE: Who do you say I am?

If you don't connect with the questions on the card you could simply write Jesus' question "Who do you say I am?" on the back and ponder that question as you drift off to sleep each night.

Closing: I have been reflecting on Jesus' question "Who do you say I am?" I would like to close by sharing the answer I have today.

Today I say that Jesus is part of the mysterious trinity which includes Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. God, You are the One who set the stars in the sky, taught the birds to sing and who put the breath of

life into our lungs. God you are Three in One, you are the connection between all living beings.

You are the Christ, the anointed one. You know the fullness of our human hearts, you have wept, gotten angry, confused and wondered if God was still there. You are the one who will walk with my grieving friend, and all who mourn. You are the one who gathers all our tears and hold them in your heart.

God, you are the One who brings healing and wholeness. You are the Source of Love. You stitch up our wounds and weave our pain into an expansion of love in our souls. You are the one who will lead us out of the pit of bitterness. You are merciful and kind and allow us to dwell with you forever.

Jesus is asking you, “Who do you say I am?” How will you respond?

I pray that pondering the question will expand your heart and mind and bring you closer to God. Amen