

## Asking Good Questions

by Jan Johnson

### Four Kinds of Questions

1. **Warm-up** questions help us pull students out of the hurry of the day and focus on the lesson topic. They ask students to identify feelings, opinions, or situations in their lives:
  - Why is it so hard to wait for problems to work out?
  - When have you seen someone express hope? (You may use a real person or a character from a book, movie, or comic strip.)
  - When has it looked to you as if God wasn't working against an unjust cause?

Test the question by imagining that you've just dressed three kids, fed them breakfast, and ridden in the car with them for 10 minutes. Ask yourself the warm-up question again. Did it force you to think too much and too fast, or did it entice you?

2. **Information questions** ask participants to look for facts relevant to the study's theme:
  - What happened in this passage to upset the Pharisees?
  - Which words in this passage point to God's majesty?
  - What does this passage say about how a pure person behaves?
3. **Clarifying questions** challenge participants to compare facts in the passage with facts they already know, to look in the context for clues:
  - How did Judas' behavior in this passage (when he betrayed Christ) compare to Peter's behavior after he denied Christ?
  - Based on the context, what does the phrase, "gentle and quiet spirit" appear to mean?

Teachers often compose these questions by thinking of how the text could be misunderstood: How do you reconcile the command to confess sins to one another ([James 5:16](#)) with the fact that Christ is the only mediator between God and man ([1 Timothy 2:5](#))?

4. **Application questions** connect the facts of the lesson with moments in life when these facts can make a difference. You might begin with general questions, such as, "How do most people show favoritism?" Then ask them to identify situations in their own lives:
  - When in your life have you felt the way Paul did in [Romans 7:14-20](#)?
  - Describe a "Red Sea experience" in which you believe God helped you.
  - What would you say to someone who doubted God as Thomas did?
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## Hints for Asking Good Questions

**Why Ask Why?** Because questions are designed to draw people out, avoid asking questions that require a yes or no answer. If you must ask one, follow up with “Why?” or “Why not?” Ask specific rather than vague questions: “What does this passage tell us about our relationships with other people?” not, “What is the application of this passage?” When planning questions, try answering it yourself. Was it too difficult to answer? Did you use facts your students will not know? If so, restate the question.

**The Sound of Silence.** If students are silent after you ask a question, don't rush in with answers. If the question was insightful, students will have to consider it for a few moments. The best advice I was ever given about asking questions was to wait until I had counted to 25 silently before jumping in to rephrase it.

Most classes have two or three people who don't participate in a discussion. If you think it's appropriate, ask that quiet, thoughtful adult: “Dennis, how do you feel about this? I'd like to hear your ideas.”

Quieter students find it easier to talk if given graduated, multiple choice answers. To the question, “How would you have felt if you had been in the rich young ruler's shoes?” offer these possibilities: not upset, mildly upset, very upset. With excessively quiet students, try asking students to tell their answers to the person next to them first; then, ask everyone to report that same answer to a small group or the class. This gives shy students a chance to think about and rehearse their answer on another person before attempting to report to the class.

Before asking a question that requires participants to be vulnerable, you might confess your own shortcomings: “I yelled at my kids this week when they spilled bleach on the carpet. What makes you angry?”

But don't focus only on digging up dirt. Ask students to report their progress too: “When do you find it easiest to praise God?” “What improvement have you seen in your attitudes about money over the years?” Discussing how God has worked in our lives helps students spur one another on to love and good works.