



*Christ Teaching the Parable of the Good Samaritan, painting by Robert T. Barrett*

Jesus, the Master Teacher, skillfully used questions to challenge listeners to ponder.

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# Creating Questions That Invite Revelation

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“Only when you have questions are you really thinking and learning. . . . No questions equal no understanding, superfluous questions equal superfluous understanding, unclear questions equal unclear understanding.”<sup>1</sup> Clearly questions initiate much of the learning that takes place in gospel classrooms. Questions can also determine the depth, breadth, and length of the learning, as well as the level of participation and enjoyment. And they can even invite revelation into the hearts and minds of teachers and students.

## **Learning to Ask Better Search Questions**

Let's consider a scripture. In Matthew 4:1–11, students could be asked to search or look for the answer to the question, “What did Jesus use to overcome temptation?” This question is okay but somewhat limits the things that could be discovered. Students may answer, “He used scripture.” The limited scope of this question could cause students to miss the broader perspective and possibly miss the intent of the inspired author. Because of the limited possible responses, it would also limit student participation and leave many things undiscovered.

A better approach would be, “Students, look in Matthew 4:1–11 for the answer to the following question: How did Jesus overcome Satan's temptations?” This question will lead students to discover more. They may answer, “He quoted scriptures; He immediately repelled Satan's attacks; He refused to listen and sent Satan away.” However, an even better request would be, “Students, look in Matthew 4:1–11 for what

Jesus did to prepare for His ministry.” This question allows for greater breadth of discovery. The students will find that Jesus prayed and fasted to draw close to His Father. He also overcame temptation by using the scriptures and immediately resisting Satan’s advances. They will also find that He received revelation and was taught by the Spirit. To gain a better understanding of asking effective search questions, let us look at two different lesson plans for Matthew 4:1–11. *After reading Matthew 4:1–11, carefully compare the lessons and their questions. See if you can determine why the lesson on the right is better than the lesson on the left.*

Sample Lesson A, Matthew 4:1-11	Sample Lesson B, Matthew 4:1-11
<b>Principle: The scriptures provide power to help us overcome temptations.</b>	<b>Principle: Drawing near to God prepares us for His service and brings His divine power into our lives.</b>
Readiness: Matthew 4:1. Find what is wrong in this verse. See JST.	Search: Matthew 4:1, 17. Look for why Jesus went into the wilderness.
Search: Matthew 4:3-10. Look for what Jesus used to overcome Satan’s temptations.	Search: Matthew 4:1-11. Look for the answer to the following question: What are some things Jesus does to draw close to his Father? Find at least five ways. List on the board.
Search: David O. McKay said that temptations could be divided into three categories: appetite, pride and vanity, and riches and power. Read Matthew 4:3-10, and match the following temptations to their categories: Matthew 4:3-4 Pride and Vanity Matthew 4:5-7 Riches and Power Matthew 4:8-10 Appetite	Analyze: Choose an item from the list on the board. How do you think the item you chose helps a person draw closer to God?
Analyze: Name a sin, and then choose the category you think it fits. Why?	Read David O. McKay’s quote in the teacher resource manual; also, cross-reference Hebrews 4:15. What additional understanding do you gain?
Apply: Which category do you think Satan uses on you the most? What have you decided to do so you can overcome Satan’s temptations?	Apply: Jesus set the example of how to draw close to God and how to obtain His divine enabling power. What have you learned from His example that can be applied in your life?

As you ponder the sequence and development of the above lessons, you will readily see that the lesson on the right creates more opportunities for the students to discover, participate, and to reach greater depths of understanding than with the lesson on the left. The search questions

determine how thoroughly a scripture is explored. They may also determine the level of student participation. Learning to ask great search questions is really not difficult; the process just takes preparation and practice. First, begin with a thorough reading and study of the scripture block. Second, determine what it is you feel God wants the students to know. Third, ponder and then write a question that invites students to search the scriptures. A teacher should always remember that “the questions we ask determine where our thinking goes. Only when our thinking leads us somewhere important can we learn anything of value to us.”<sup>22</sup> Consider another example that compares two different ways to search a story:

Sample Lesson A, John 11	Sample Lesson B, John 11
<b>Principle: Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life</b>	<b>Principle: Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life</b>
Readiness: Hold up the picture of Lazarus.	Readiness: Have two students come forward, hold a picture of Lazarus, and tell his story.
Search: John 11:1-2. Individually look for who is sick.	Search: John 11:4, 6, 17, 39-40. Look for important details we have not yet identified so we can understand the significance of Lazarus's story.
Search: Bible Dictionary. Individually find out who Lazarus is. Share your answer with your neighbor.	Analyze: Why do you think Jesus purposely waited before going to Lazarus?
Search: John 11:4-7. Individually read to discover what Jesus did.	Search/Analyze: Look for what is taking place at this moment in time. Why is it happening?
Search: John 11:11-14. Individually read for what happened to Lazarus.	Odd Rows: John 11:23-27, 45, 48, Matthew 21:7-9
Search: John 11:34-44. Individually find out what Jesus did.	Even Rows: John 11:48, 53, 12:9-11
Analyze: Discuss the following question with a partner. How do you think you would have felt if you had witnessed the raising of Lazarus?	Analyze: Why do you think the raising of Lazarus caused such different reactions?
Apply: Discuss as a group and be prepared to report on what we can learn from this story.	Apply: What lessons can be learned from the story of Lazarus? Carefully read John 11:25-27; it contains two testimonies: Jesus's and Martha's. Write in your journals your own testimony of Jesus.

The lesson on the left searches for details, facts, and information in the story. This type of search is not very engaging or inspiring.

The student answers will be short and factual. The lesson on the right allows students to participate and teach what they already know. It is usually better to tell the story or have students tell the story, and then the searching for additional information can lead to the discovery of principles of truth that will change lives. The above examples show how questions can be used to organize a complete lesson, how writing the lesson helps the teacher keep the lesson logical, and how pondering the questions and the students' possible answers helps in crafting questions that are very effective in the classroom.

### Teaching with Questions

This type of simple, organized lesson plan has tremendous flexibility. Notice the previous lesson plans for John 11. The lesson on the left indicates in italics *how* the teacher will have the students search, analyze, or apply, whereas in the lesson on the right, the *how* is noticeably absent. As a teacher begins teaching with questions, he or she will usually have to plan *how* the students will find, report, and discuss answers. Each portion of the lesson (search, analyze, apply) can be done individually, in pairs or in small groups, or as a class. After considerable practice in preparing and teaching with questions, the teacher's confidence and skill will improve. The teacher is now prepared to read the class and then respond according to need.<sup>3</sup> Does the class need to be more involved? Then answer the question in pairs or small groups. Does the class need to be settled down? Then individually find or write answers. If the class is in good order, decide what would be the best way to get students to deepen their understanding and feelings or to have the students teach each other. Each type of question can be handled according to the needs of the class and the guidance of the Spirit so that the same lesson could be taught in different ways to different classes. The same scripture block is covered, and the same questions are used; however, the *student focus* is *tailored* to each class. Teachers who read the class and respond appropriately are able to keep the class participating, discovering, and learning. Thus, a very enjoyable and edifying classroom experience is maintained throughout the entire class hour.

“The role of a . . . teacher is much like an orchestra conductor who is there to keep order and give general direction and instruction. An orchestra conductor, however, does not produce the music. A good gospel teacher uses effective questions as a conductor uses a baton.”<sup>4</sup> The questions are the framework around which other activities are woven. These questions bring to the classroom a high degree of student participation. As Elder Richard G. Scott has taught, “Participation

weaves the gospel into [students'] very character.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the teacher's dominance decreases in the classroom, and the students' speaking, sharing, and learning increases.

### **Learning to Ask Better Analytical Questions**

Analytical questions are one way a teacher can carefully orchestrate understanding to all the students so that application can more easily be made. A teacher who desires to strengthen the analysis part of the lesson needs to look first at the search. Whenever thorough searching of the scriptures has occurred, the analysis is as simple as asking students what they think. One way to strengthen analytical questions is to make them more student friendly and more open, allowing for multiple responses. The teacher could ask, “What does it mean to . . . ?” or “What do you think it means to . . . ?” The second example will get more response because you are allowing the students to share their opinion rather than looking for the “right answers.” Wording the question so that several answers are possible also helps. For example, “What are the differences . . . ?” will get more participation than “What is the difference . . . ?” The lesson in Matthew 4 has two very good examples. Looking for what Jesus used to overcome temptation is singular. The responses will be factual and short. However, looking for how Jesus overcame temptation allows for multiple answers, opinions, and ideas. Some questions that almost always help students come to an understanding are “What do you think?” “Why do you think?” “What are some ways?” or “What reasons can you think of?”

Using small groups and pairs is very effective in the analysis part of the lesson. Have the students search, mark, think, or write individually before they are asked to show, share, or teach a partner, a small group, or the class. Younger students sometimes have a difficult time getting and staying on task. When students are given time to process and gather their thoughts, more of them will participate, and the responses will have more substance. Having the question written on the board makes the task very clear and helps students to think a little more and a little deeper. Having students search different scriptures or having them look for different things sets up a situation where they have something to teach others. The previous lesson on the right for John 11 has an excellent example. Each row of students has something of importance that their classmates needed and did not receive. It also helps a teacher cover more material and still maintain a student focus.

Remember the importance of knowing why a teacher should ask analytical questions. They help the teacher see what the students understand so that more clarification can be given where needed. They also encourage more participation and facilitate students' talking, sharing, and even teaching each other. Finally, analytical questions bring understanding to all who are in the class so that personal application can be made by each individual student. Remember that application cannot occur until understanding is achieved.

### Learning to Ask Better Application Questions

Once understanding has taken place, application is more easily made. However, asking questions that help students apply gospel principles has some unique challenges. It can become boring, monotonous, and routine. It can also invade the students' personal lives if not done with care and wisdom. If asked properly, application questions can inspire, cause action, and even invite personal revelation and deep commitment. These questions can help bridge the gap between the past and the present. Application questions help take the gospel deep into the minds and hearts of the students. When carefully asked, these questions identify principles of the gospel so clearly that students leave the classroom knowing what was taught, what it means, and how it applies to their lives.

A few helpful suggestions make these questions better and very effective. Do not ask the same application question day after day. Do not have the students write in their journals every day to apply the lesson. Do not ask students to share personal, private things, especially in the areas of personal sins and repentance. Two kinds of applications are possible: general and personal. Both are very effective. The following are some examples of various ways to ask application questions:

#### Matthew 4:1-11

What did you learn from Jesus's example that can be applied to your life?

This is a personal application question. It would be appropriate to have students volunteer to share their responses.

What have you decided to do so you can overcome Satan's temptations?

This is a personal application question. This could be shared with caution. Say, "I would like a few to respond. Who is comfortable in sharing?"

Think of something you would like to overcome, and write the answer to this question: What do you feel God would like you to do so you can be successful?

This information is very personal and should not be shared in class.



### John 11

What can we learn from this story?

This is a general application question. It will allow students to teach and testify to each other and make sure all the students understand and can apply the principle.

Carefully read John 11:25-27; it contains two testimonies: Jesus's and Martha's. After pondering, what will you write in your journal about your own testimony of Jesus Christ?

This is a personal application question. It allows time for each student to think and ponder. Appropriately, students can be asked to share answers in pairs, in small groups, or to the whole class.

Will you share a time when you felt the same as Martha because of the power of the Spirit?

Some will not have had this experience, so asking for volunteers to answer is the best approach. This can greatly influence the other students because a testimony will be shared. It will bring to mind a spiritual experience. This question should be asked only if the classroom climate is conducive to the Holy Ghost.

Questions that promote application can be answered by the class, in small groups, in pairs, or individually. If shared with a small group, some students could afterward be asked to tell the whole class. Likewise when students are asked individually to think, ponder, or write, a few can be asked to share their answers with the class. The teacher should be cautious not to cause students embarrassment in sharing personal thoughts. The better the scriptures have been searched and analyzed, the easier the application will come. Many times application will happen spontaneously because the students have come to understand and feel so deeply about the principle being considered. When students make application, asking an application question is not necessary. In fact, it will be counterproductive. Often, teachers will lecture or pontificate during this point of the lesson. Simple words of testimony from the teacher validating the students' comments are usually most effective.

A teacher can help make the application in several other ways. The teacher can simply (1) tell the students one way the principle could be applied, (2) share a story that illustrates the application, or (3) bear testimony of the truth of the principle being taught. When using these three ways, the teacher is assuming that the application question has already been created in the minds of the students. The question is being answered without being asked. As with many other things, overuse of these three ways of making application becomes a teacher-centered approach. However, occasional use is effective and adds variety.



Overtly asking application questions does some very important things. It causes the eternal principles of truth to be clearly identified, and students leave the class knowing what was taught that day. The answering of the question facilitates students' teaching and testifying to their classmates of the truthfulness of gospel principles. These expressions of belief and sharing of ideas powerfully affect others in the class. The student comments are mini-testimonies that are often accompanied by the Holy Ghost. Also, application questions liken the scripture record to the students' personal lives. The scriptures have meaning that relates not just to a few bright students but to all the students in the class.

### Selecting, Writing, and Identifying Principles

One of the most important aspects of successfully teaching with questions is choosing the principles and doctrines that will be explored. To be able to formulate and ask effective search, analyze, and apply questions, a teacher must first know what he or she wants the students to know. Sometimes a teacher may have difficulty in putting a gospel principle into words. Many teachers have found the following sequence facilitates the process. After thoroughly reading the scripture, ask: "What is it that I want my students to know?" This helps formulate the desired outcome in the teacher's mind. Next, consult the curriculum. The curriculum helps the teacher check his or her focus, ideas, and doctrinal purity. Now, the teacher is ready to determine what students need to search so they can discover what the teacher has determined he or she wants the students to know. The analysis and application questions are now rather easy to complete. This thinking, reasoning, searching process helps a teacher to know the material even better. Last, the teacher is now ready to put into words the principle that is to be taught.

A principle of the gospel is a truth that has eternal significance.<sup>6</sup> Many times the wording of the scripture is very inspiring and can be used for the principle statement exactly as written. There is power in the Lord's language, such as "I am not ashamed of the gospel" (Romans 1:16), "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22), or "Put on the whole armour of God" (Ephesians 6:11). Sometimes a teacher must formulate a statement of principle in his or her own words because it is not clearly or concisely stated in the scripture. In Romans 3–5, a summary statement of principle could be worded as follows: "Both faith and works are necessary to receive the full measure of the Atonement." Another example from 1 Corinthians 12–13 could be written as follows: "Spiritual gifts are given to the Saints in God's true Church." Two important things to remember are the fol-

lowing: (1) The principle needs to be a truth that has eternal significance to the students of the class, and (2) The principle needs to be worded as clearly and concisely as possible. The principle affects every aspect of the lesson, including how the teacher words and asks the search, analysis, and application questions. Principle statements that are true to the scripture text and that are packaged for student application<sup>7</sup> cause the questions to be relevant and effective. They give the lesson meaning and power. And they even invite revelation!

Teachers have several ways to make sure the principle is identified during a lesson. The principle can be written on the board, it can be written in the scriptures, or the class together can complete a sentence so it is a statement of principle. Students can be invited to share principles they have discovered. They can select from a list the principle-statement they relate to the most. Taking the time to ask a question so the principle is clearly identified connects all the dots. This identification helps place eternal truths into each student's memory so it can sink deep into their hearts and minds. Identifying the principle more than once during the class hour can also help in achieving the desired clarity.

### **Learner Readiness**

After the lesson has been prepared, a short readiness item to draw the students into the scripture can be formulated. Readiness items can be very helpful in creating and maintaining the proper classroom climate. The best readiness is short and creates within the students the desire to search the scriptures for answers. The readiness activity should be created after the main concepts are identified because it will have a tendency to overpower the lesson and direct what is taught. The principles the teacher has selected should determine the searching, thinking, understanding, and applying of the scriptures.

### **Questions that Improve the Devotional**

The devotional also becomes more effective when the right questions are asked and answered. "There is a casual way . . . and a careful way"<sup>8</sup> to conduct the devotional. Having a student assigned to give the scripture or thought has been a tradition or mainstay of seminary and institute for years. A more careful way to conduct the devotional is to have several students volunteer to read a scripture from their recent personal reading and have them share answers to the questions of "Why do you like the scripture?" or "How does the scripture help you?" and

then close in the name of Jesus Christ. This carefulness in the devotional adds a dimension that seems to bring the Spirit in a powerful way. Allowing two or three students to share at the beginning of each class is very inspiring to their fellow classmates. The percentage of students personally reading scriptures will increase. The students are exercising their agency and sharing personal feelings about the scriptures, which in turn invites the Spirit. This is a simple change that is brought about by asking a better question, and the results are wonderful.

## Conclusion

Because “the best teachers are usually those who understand the relationship between learning and asking questions,” this article has attempted to do the following:

1. Deepen teachers’ understanding of the importance of questions in the gospel classroom.
2. Cause teachers to gain the desire, resolve, and commitment to improve their questions.
3. Help teachers see how to develop better questioning skills, and then to do it.
4. Help teachers to invite revelation into their classrooms and into the students’ lives.

Teaching by using questions causes the gospel to go deep into the hearts and minds of the students. Doctrine and Covenants 50:10–12 explains why this is so. It states, “Let us reason together that ye may understand; . . . even so will I, the Lord, reason with you that you may understand.” To bring about successful reasoning, both parties must be thinking and communicating until understanding comes. One of the most successful missionaries of all time used this method of teaching: “Paul, as his manner was, . . . reasoned with them out of the scriptures” (Acts 17:2). Jesus asked His Apostles, “But whom say ye that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). His question caused His disciples to think, respond, and eventually come to understand. Peter’s response allowed the Spirit to take the knowledge of Christ deep into his own heart and mind. This question and answer also taught the other disciples and opened the way for Jesus to teach even more. The scriptures record, “And I will show unto you my *strong reasoning*” (D&C 45:10; emphasis added); also, “And for this cause, that men might be made partakers of the glories which were to be revealed, the Lord sent forth the fullness of his gospel, his everlasting covenant, *reasoning in plain-*

*ness and simplicity*” (D&C 133:57; emphasis added). Asking the right questions causes this strong reasoning to take place. It causes the gospel to be taught in plainness, in simplicity, and in power.

Elder Henry B. Eyring has said, “Most of us have had some experience with self-improvement efforts. My experience has taught me this about how people and organizations improve: the best place to look is for small changes we could make in things we do often. . . . And if we can be led by inspiration to choose the right small things to change, consistent obedience will bring great improvement.”<sup>10</sup> All gospel teachers use questions often in their classrooms to varying degrees. I am convinced that improving our questioning skills is one of the greatest things that we can do to teach as Jesus, the Master Teacher, taught. Most of the changes that have been explained and suggested in this article are small things, yet they can multiply the effectiveness of the gospel classroom a hundredfold. And, most importantly, questions invite the Holy Ghost into the lives of the students so that the principles of the gospel go deep into their hearts and minds. I have had numerous teachers report that asking better questions, even the right questions, has brought excitement and vitality into their teaching as never before. These teachers indicate that the students are having a great experience because they are more engaged in the learning process. And, finally, they report that they are teaching by the Spirit at a level that used to happen only occasionally, but now it happens almost every day. **RE**

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## Notes

1. Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 114–15.

2. Paul and Elder, *Critical Thinking*, 114.

3. See *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 25.

4. Robert Jones, “Asking Questions First,” *Ensign*, January 2002, 25.

5. Richard G. Scott, CES satellite training broadcast, August 10, 2003.

6. See Henry B. Eyring, CES satellite training broadcast, August 10, 2003.

7. See Richard G. Scott, “Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge,” *Ensign*, November 1993, 86.

8. Henry B. Eyring, *The Lord Will Multiply the Harvest*, An Evening with Elder Henry B. Eyring, February 6, 1998, 3.

9. Paul and Elder, *Critical Thinking*, 114.

10. Eyring, *The Lord Will Multiply the Harvest*, 3.