
1. What do you love? Hate?¹

This “first great commandment” question searches you out heart, soul, mind and might. There is no deeper question to ask of any person at any time. There is no deeper explanation for why you do what you do. Dis-

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ordered loves hijack our hearts from our rightful Lord and Father.

2. What do you want, desire, crave, lust, and wish for? What desires do you serve and obey?²

This summarizes the internal operations of the desire-driven “flesh” in the New Testament epistles. “My will be done” and “I want_____” are often quite accessible. Various desires rule people, so go for details of *this* person, *now*, in *this* situation. Notice, sometimes another person’s will rules you (peer pressure, people-pleasing, slave-like, or chameleon behavior). In such cases, your heart’s craving is to get whatever good they promise and avoid whatever bad they threaten: “I crave to be included, appreciated, accepted, admired by you.”

3. What do you seek, aim for, pursue? What are your goals and expectations?³

This particularly captures that your life is active and moves in a direction. We are purpose-full. Human motivation is not passive, as if hard-wired needs, instincts, or drives were controlled from outside us by being “unmet,” “frustrated,” or “conditioned.” People are active verbs.

¹Matthew 22:37-39; 2 Timothy 3:2-4; Luke 16:13-14.

²Galatians 5:16-25; Ephesians 2:3, 4:22; 2 Timothy 2:22; Titus 3:3; 1 Peter 1:14, 2:11, 4:2; 2 Peter 1:4, 2:10; James 1:14-15, 4:1-3; Proverbs 10:3, 10:28, 11:6-7; Psalm 17:14-15, 73:23-28.

³Matthew 6:32-33; 2 Timothy 2:22.

4. Where do you bank your hopes?⁴

The future dimension is prominent in God’s interpretation of human motives. People energetically sacrifice to attain what they hope for. What is it? People in despair have had hopes dashed. What were those shattered hopes?

5. What do you fear? What do you not want? What do you tend to worry about?⁵

Sinful fears invert cravings. If I want to avoid something at all costs—loss of reputation, loss of control, poverty, ill health, rejection, etc.—I am ruled by a lustful fear.

6. What do you feel like doing?⁶

This is street talk for question 2, what do you desire? To be “feeling-oriented” means to make your wants your guide: “I feel like cursing you. I don’t feel like doing my chores.”

7. What do you think you need? What are your “felt needs”?⁷

Questions 2 and 3 exposed your aims in terms of activity and pursuit. This question exposes your aims in terms of what you hope to receive, get, and keep. Felt needs are frequently taken as self-evident necessities to be acquired, not as deceptive slave-masters. Our culture of need reinforces the flesh’s instincts and habits. In most cases, a person’s felt needs are street talk for idolatrous demands for love, understanding, a sense of being in control, affirmation, and achievement.

8. What are your plans, agendas, strategies, and intentions designed to accomplish?⁸

This is another way to size up what you are after. The egocentricity lurking within even the most noble-sounding plans can be appalling. No one ever asserts, “The expansion of our church into a mega-church will get me fame, wealth, and power,” but such motives are garden-variety human nature. Their presence, even covertly, will pervert and stain one’s actions to some degree or other.

9. What makes you tick? What sun does your planet revolve around? Where do you find your garden of delight? What lights up your world? What fountain of life, hope, and delight do you drink from? What food sustains your life? What really matters to you? What fairy castle do you construct in the clouds? What pipe dreams tantalize or terrify you? Around what do you organize your life? What magnetic north orients your

⁴1 Peter 1:13; 1 Timothy 6:17.

⁵Matthew 6:25-32, 13:22.

⁶See footnote 2.

⁷Matthew 6:8-15, 6:25-32; 1 Kings 3:5-14; all the prayers in the Bible express reoriented felt needs.

⁸See footnote 3.

world?⁹

Many gripping metaphors can express the question, “What are you really living for?” Notice that to be ruled, say, by deep thirsts for intimacy, achievement, respect, health, or wealth does not define these as legitimate, unproblematic desires. They function perversely, placing ourselves at the center of the universe. We are meant to long supremely for the Lord Himself, for the Giver, not His gifts. The absence of blessings—rejection, vanity, reviling, illness, poverty—often is the crucible in which we learn to love God for God. In our idolatry we instate gifts as supreme goods, and make the Giver into the errand boy of wandering desires.

10. Where do you find refuge, safety, comfort, escape, pleasure, security?¹⁰

This is the Psalms’ question, digging out your false trusts, your escapisms that substitute for the Lord. Many of the “addictive behaviors” are helpfully addressed by this question. They often arise in the context of life’s troubles and pressures, and function as false refuges.

11. What or who do you trust?¹¹

Trust is one of the major verbs relating you to God – or to false gods and lies. Crucial Psalms breathe trust in our Father and Shepherd. Where instead do you place life-directing, life-anchoring trust? In other people? In your abilities or achievements? In your church or theological tradition? In possessions? In diet, exercise, and medical care?

12. Whose performance matters? On whose shoulders does the well-being of your world rest? Who can make it better, make it work, make it safe, make it successful?¹²

This digs out self-righteousness, or living through your children, or pinning hopes on getting the right kind of husband or wife, and so forth.

13. Who must you please? Whose opinion of you counts? From whom do you desire approval and fear rejection? Whose value system do you measure yourself against? In whose eyes are you living? Whose love and approval do you need?¹³

When you lose God, you enter a jungle of distortion. You tend to live before your own eyes or before the eyes of others—or both. The “social idols” take numerous

particular forms: acceptance or rejection, being included or excluded, approval or criticism, affection or hostility, adoration or belittlement, intimacy or alienation, being understood or caricatured.

14. Who are your role models? What kind of person do you think you ought to be or want to be?¹⁴

Your “idol” or “hero” reveals you. Such persons embody the “image” towards which you aspire.

15. On your deathbed, what would sum up your life as worthwhile? What gives your life meaning?¹⁵

The Bible often uses the metaphor of treasure or inheritance to speak of motivation.

This is Ecclesiastes’ question. That book examines scores of options—and finds all but one option ultimately futile. At some point, translate Ecclesiastes 2 into its modern equivalents!

16. How do you define and weigh success or failure, right or wrong, desirable or undesirable, in any particular situation?¹⁶

The standards that you serve and employ may be wildly distorted. God intends to renew your “conscience,” that by which you evaluate yourself and others. If you approach life “in your own understanding” or “in your own eyes,” you will live as a fool.

17. What would make you feel rich, secure, prosperous? What must you get to make life sing?¹⁷

The Bible often uses the metaphor of treasure or inheritance to speak of motivation.

18. What would bring you the greatest pleasure, happiness and delight? The greatest pain and misery?¹⁸

Blessedness and accursedness are the Bible’s way of discussing happiness and woe. What calculation do you make about where and how to find blessing? Your calculation reveals what you live for.

19. Whose coming into political power would make everything better?¹⁹

This used to be less true of Americans than of many other nations, where politics is a major locus of idola-

⁹Isaiah 1:29-30; 50:10-11; Jeremiah 2:13, 17:13; Matthew 4:4, 5:6; John 4:32-34, 6:25-69.

¹⁰Psalms 23, 27, 31, 46, and about two-thirds of the rest of the Psalms.

¹¹Proverbs 3:5, 11:28, 12:15; Psalms 23, 103, 131.

¹²Philippians 1:6, 2:13, 3:3-11, 4:13; Psalm 49:13; Jeremiah 17:1-14.

¹³Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, 29:25; John 12:43; 1 Corinthians 4:3-5; 2 Corinthians 10:18.

¹⁴Romans 8:29; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10.

¹⁵Ecclesiastes.

¹⁶1 Corinthians 10:24-27; Proverbs 3:5; Judges 21:25.

¹⁷Proverbs 3:13-18, 8:10f, 8:17-21; Matthew 6:19-21, 13:45-46; Luke 16:10-15; 1 Peter 1:2-7.

¹⁸Matthew 5:3-11; Psalms 1, 35; Jeremiah 17:7-8; Luke 6:27-42.

¹⁹Matthew 6:10.

trous hopes. But as cultural consensus breaks down, many people increasingly invest hopes in political power.

20. Whose victory or success would make your life happy? How do you define victory and success?²⁰

How does inertial self-interest reveal itself? Some people “live and die” based on the performance of a local sports team, the financial bottom line of their company, their Grade Point Average, or their physical appearance.

Prayer is about desire; we ask for what we want. Do your prayers reflect the desires of God or of the flesh?

21. What do you see as your rights? What do you feel entitled to?²¹

This question often nicely illuminates the motivational pattern of angry, aggrieved, self-righteous, self-pitying people. Our culture of entitlement reinforces the flesh’s instincts and habits. “I deserve_____”?

22. In what situations do you feel pressured or tense? Confident and relaxed? When you are pressured, where do you turn? What do you think about? What are your escapes? What do you escape from?²²

This question comes at matters from a slightly different direction. Many times certain patterns of sin are situation-dependent. Teasing out the significant aspects of the situation can hold up a mirror to the heart’s motives. When public speaking “makes you” tense, perhaps your heart is ruled by your own performance in the eyes of others (fear of man and pride). When paying bills generates anxiety, perhaps a strand of mammon-worship operates within you.

23. What do you want to get out of life? What payoff do you seek out of the things you do? “What do you get out of doing that?”²³

This is a concrete way to restate questions 3 and 8, digging out your operative goals. Idols, lies, and cravings *promise* goodies. Serve Baal, and he’ll give you fertility. Get that cute guy to like you, and you’ll feel good about yourself. Make \$100,000, and you’ll show up those people who thought you’d never make it in life.

24. What do you pray for?²⁴

²⁰Romans 8:37-39; Revelation 2:7, etc.; Psalms 96-99.

²¹1 Corinthians 9; Romans 5:6-10; Psalm 103:10.

²²See the dozens of Psalms of refuge.

²³Proverbs 3:13-18; Matthew 6:1-5, 16-18.

²⁴James 4:3; Matthew 6:5-15; Luke 18:9-14.

Your prayers often reveal the pattern of your imbalance and self-centeredness. Of the many possible things to ask for, what do you concentrate on? Prayer is about desire; we ask for what we want. Do your prayers reflect the desires of God or of the flesh?

25. What do you think about most often? What preoccupies or obsesses you? In the morning, to what does your mind drift instinctively? What is your “mindset”?²⁵

Hold up a mirror to your drift, that you might reset your course!

26. What do you talk about? What is important to you? What attitudes do you communicate?²⁶

This question and the next presume the closest possible connection between motives and behavior. Notice both what people choose to talk about and how they say it. Our words proclaim what our hearts worship.

27. How do you spend your time? What are your priorities?²⁷

Notice what you and others choose to do. It is a signpost to the heart’s operative loyalties.

28. What are your characteristic fantasies, either pleasurable or fearful? Daydreams? What do your night dreams revolve around?²⁸

We are still responsible human beings even when more or less detached from consciousness. Your patterns of concern and desire are revealed in reverie.

29. What are the functional beliefs that control how you interpret your life and determine how you act?²⁹

Hebrews 4:12 speaks of the “thoughts and intentions” of the heart. Perhaps we could translate this “beliefs and desires.” Both the lies you believe and the lusts you pursue undergird visible sins. A person’s functional, operative beliefs control responses. The ways you understand God, yourself, others, the devil, right and wrong, true and false, past, present, future... have pervasive effects.

30. What are your idols or false gods? In what do you place your trust, or set your hopes? What do you turn to or seek? Where do you take refuge? Who is the savior, judge, controller, provider, protector in your world? Who do you serve? What “voice” controls you?³⁰

²⁵Colossians 3:1-5; Philippians 3:19; Romans 8:5-16.

²⁶Luke 6:45; Proverbs 10:19; Ephesians 4:29.

²⁷Proverbs 1:16, 10:4, 23:19-21, 24:33.

²⁸Ecclesiastes 5:3-7; see footnotes 2 and 5.

²⁹See the entire Bible, as God seeks to renew darkened minds from falsehood.

³⁰See the entire Bible, as God seeks to deliver people from idols, to serve the living and true God; Ezekiel 14:1-8; Acts 26:18; Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 5:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:9f; 1

This entire list of 35 questions pursues things that usurp God. Each of these can metaphorically be termed an “idol” to which you give loyalty. The voices you listen to mimic specific characteristics of God. Start to trace that out into the details of life lived, and your ability to address the vertical dimension relevantly and specifically will mature.

31. How do you live for yourself?³¹

This is a general way of asking any of these questions. “Self” takes a thousand shapes and wears a thousand disguises.

32. How do you live as a slave of the devil?³²

Human motivation is not purely “psychological,” “psychosocial,” or “psychosocialsomatic.” When you serve lusts and lies, you serve a personal enemy who wishes to deceive, enslave, and murder you. Human motivation is thoroughly “covenantal.” You may serve the devil, or you may serve the Lord, but you’re going to have to serve somebody, as Bob Dylan put it.

33. How do you implicitly say, “If only....” (to get what you want, avoid what you don’t want, keep what you have)?³³

The “If onlys” are street talk that can uncover many motivational themes in the interest of creating biblical self-understanding and repentance.

34. What instinctively seems and feels right to you? What are your opinions, things you feel are true?³⁴

You not only “feel like” doing some things (question 6 above), you also “feel that” certain things are true. On the contrary, wisdom is correctable, as it listens and learns.

35. Where do you find your identity? How do you define who you are?³⁵

The Bible says radical things about self-knowledge, identity, and the categories of self-evaluation (“conscience”). The places people typically look for identity are dry wells.

John 5:21; Jeremiah 17:5; James 4:11-12.

³¹Luke 9:23-25; 2 Corinthians 5:14f.

³²John 8:44; Acts 26:18; Ephesians 2:2-3; 2 Timothy 2:26; James 3:14-16.

³³1 Kings 21:1-7; Hebrews 11:25; Philippians 3:4-11.

³⁴Judges 21:25; Proverbs 3:5, 3:7, 12:15, 14:12, 18:2; Isaiah 53:6; Philippians 3:19; Romans 16:18.

³⁵For example, take the book of Ephesians and notice every word or phrase that describes “identity,” either about Paul himself, or about who we used to be, or about who we now are. You will find over 30 different statements in this short letter.