

Misperceptions of Jesus: #6

"Jesus: The Misunderstood Teacher"

Matt. 15:29-16:12

--CEFC 12/29/19

Topic: Jesus;

I've never had much sympathy for those prophetic prognosticators
who presume to tell us what God is doing
and what he ***will do*** in our world.

Church history is littered with predictions about the end of the world,
and a long list of dates for that end have all come and gone.

One heretical group of Christians in the second century
were sure they knew when it would be--
Maximilla, a prophetess who died in 179 A.D. declared,
"After me there is no more prophecy, but only the end of the world."

In the Middle Ages there was Joachim of Fiore—
a monk who predicted on the basis of the numbers of Dan. 11:3 and 12:6
that a new and final age of universal monastic contemplation, peace and rest
would begin in 1260.

During the Reformation, Martin Luther was sure that the end
was just around the corner,

though he did reprimand severely a fellow theologian
for calculating that the world would end at 8:00 a.m.
on the 19th of Oct. in 1533.

And as you well know, this sort of speculation continues today.

Back in 1987 I received in the mail a booklet outlining why the coming of Christ
would take place in 1988—
it gave 88 reasons, in fact, why that was so.

In early 1989, I received another book by the same author
that explained what went wrong with his prediction—
The answer was simple: his calculation had not taken into account
the fact that the first century only had 99 years
he was just a year off.
I didn't hear from him again.

Radio evangelist Harold Camping's predictions received a great deal of attention,
most recently that Christ would return on May 21, 2011.
He was wrong---yet again.

Prophets of this sort purport to read the "signs of the times"—
the sorts of events chronicled in the *New York Times*.
Moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem is the latest such sign
fueling more prophetic speculation.

Now, this is not to denigrate by any means
the notion that there will be some great and glorious end
to this present world order.

That conviction is deeply embedded in the biblical story.
God's good creation has been spoiled by sin,
but God's purpose is to redeem his creation--
to renew it under his gracious rule once again.

He will overcome the powers of evil and death
and will bring about a new age of peace and justice
in which he will be present with his people.

This is what the Jews of Jesus' day called the coming of the kingdom of God.

God would visit his people, and he would forgive them,
restoring to them his blessing.

And he would bring judgment on all those who oppressed them.

Theologians call this the "eschatological hope" of Israel--

a term which comes from the Greek word *eschaton*, which means "end."

It describes their hope for the end of this present age
and the dawning of a new and glorious age to come.

Jesus himself spoke of these two ages—

the present age and the age to come,
and when asked about the signs of the coming of that future age
he said that before that day, among other things,

"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.

There will be famines and earthquakes in various places" (Mt. 24:7).

The implication is that

those who would be prepared for his coming

must be alert for the **"signs of the times"**

which would signal his arrival.

So it is not inappropriate that we should be watching for such signs.

But what is very significant for us this morning

is that this term **"signs of the times"** occurs only once in the New Testament,
and where it occurs, **in today's passage,**

it refers not to some future sequence of events of some age to come.

No, it refers to events that were already happening in the ministry of Jesus himself.

Look at Matt. 16:1—

"The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus

and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.

He replied, "When evening comes, you say,

'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,'

and in the morning,

'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' /

We might think of the rhyme:

"Red sky at morning, sailors take warning.

Red sky at night, sailor's delight."

"You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky," Jesus says.

You are very good at predicting the weather--

"You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky,

but you cannot interpret the signs of the times."

This morning we want to consider what those signs of the times were
that Jesus was referring to here,
and then consider two reactions to those signs
that we see illustrated in this story.

The thrust of this Gospel episode that Matthew recounts
is that the "signs of the times" we must recognize
point us to the true identity of Jesus—
the one who calls us into a saving relationship of faith.

What were these "**signs of the times,**" then, that the Pharisees and Sadducees
ought to have been able to understand?

In Matthew's telling, it seem clear
that they were the kinds of things mentioned in the immediately preceding passage:
in vv. 29-39 of Matthew 15—

"Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee.

Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down.

Great crowds came to him,

bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others,

and laid them at his feet;

and he healed them.

The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking,

the crippled made well,

the lame walking and the blind seeing.

And they praised the God of Israel."

What was supposed to happen when God visited his people,
and forgave their sin, and bestowed his blessing upon them?

Listen to these words from the prophet Isaiah, written about 700 B.C.,
which we read earlier:

Isa. 35:5 **"Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy."**

Or Isa. 29:14 **"Therefore once more I will astound these people
with wonder upon wonder;
18 "In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll,
and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see.
19 Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD;
the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.
. . . (v.23) and will stand in awe of the God of Israel."**

Isn't this what was happening in the ministry of Jesus?

Wasn't this evidence right before their eyes

of the dawning of that kingdom of God

for which the people had been longing?

Wasn't this a visible demonstration of the power of God at work,

bringing blessing to his people?

Wasn't that new age beginning to emerge in the ministry of Jesus? /

The following story in the Gospel continues this theme--

A great crowd had come to Jesus in a rather deserted area,
with perhaps as many as ten thousand people,
if you include the women and children.

There were no MacDonald's or 7-Elevens around to get something to eat,
and Jesus was concerned for those who had come to him,
fearing that they might collapse from hunger on the way home.

"I have **compassion** for these people," he says.

There is perhaps no description that better captures
the heart of Jesus than that--
he had a heart of compassion.

He is the good shepherd,
who seeks to care for his flock--
these lost sheep of the house of Israel.¹

The disciples seem to know just what he had in mind--
he wanted them somehow to find food
to feed this great throng of people.

v. 33- **"Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?"**
they asked.

This question has often confounded commentators.
Hasn't Jesus already fed a great crowd--back in chap. 14--a crowd of over 5,000?
If these disciples had been there then,

¹cf. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain*, chap. 8.

how could they ask this question here?

Some scholars try to argue that could have only been one such feeding
and that these two stories have developed from just one event.

But the Gospel writers surely thought that there were two such miracles--

the words of Jesus in chap. 15 require it.

So what are we to think?

Could the disciples have asked such a question

after having already seen Jesus feed a crowd before?

Knowing human nature, I think they could have asked such a question--

and that's precisely the point that comes up later in chap. 16.

They were slow to grasp what was now happening before them in the ministry of Jesus.

All they knew was that they didn't have the power or the resources

to meet the need of so many people.

And they still didn't quite grasp that Jesus could make it possible.

So Jesus takes the lead--

34 "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked.

"Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish."

35 He told the crowd to sit down on the ground.

36 Then he took the seven loaves and the fish,

and when he had given thanks,

he broke them and gave them to the disciples,

and they in turn to the people.

37 They all ate and were satisfied.

Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces
that were left over."

Several things are significant about this act of power--

First, the point of this story is not simply that
we just ought to learn to share what we have,
and if we just share, amazing things can happen.

Jesus is not Mr. Rogers.

No, this story is reminiscent of the days of Moses

when Israel was in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt,
and the Lord caused manna to appear to feed the Israelites,
and then gave quail in great abundance to meet their need.

As in those first days through Moses God provided for this people,

so in these last days through his Messiah

he would do the same.

But such an abundant provision of food on this mountainside

would also have evoked the image of the great messianic banquet
that was to appear in the age to come--

a banquet described in Isa. 25--

Isa. 25:6-- "On this mountain the LORD Almighty

will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine--

the best of meats and the finest of wines."

Jesus has referred to it earlier, in 8:11--

"I say to you that many will come from the east and the west,

and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
in the kingdom of heaven."

This feeding of this great crowd was **a sign of the times**--

a sign, a foretaste, of that messianic banquet

that was about to become a reality.

God was coming to bless his people.

The promises of God to Israel,

and through Israel to the world,

were in the process of fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

He was the Messiah of Israel.

He was the one through whom the kingdom of God

was coming into the world.

He was ushering in a new age in God's dealing with his people--

The King has come,

that new day was dawning--

he was doing a new thing.

This age of sin and death was coming to an end.

These were events with cosmic significance.

And as we face our future,

as people speculate about the end that is to come,

we must be certain that we first understand

the end that has already begun in Christ.

The “signs of the times” point back to him--
and nothing that is to come is as important as what has *already come*.
In fact, where we will stand with regard to that age to come
will depend on how we have responded to what has already taken place.

These signs point us to the true identity of Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God.

And how will you react to these signs of the times displayed in the ministry of Jesus?

Our passage gives us two different responses.

First, there is that of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Now, the Pharisees and Sadducees were very different in their views
on all sorts of issues.

The **Sadducees** were basically the aristocratic, priestly rulers of Israel.

They had positions of power,
and worked in collaboration with the Roman rulers.
And because they were in power, they tended to be rather conservative--
trying to hold on to their social advantages.

They stressed the law of Moses as revealed in the Pentateuch,
the first five books of the Bible,
especially that part of it which regulated the worship of God in the temple.
They didn't recognize the oral traditions of the rabbis,
and they saw doctrines like that of the resurrection as a later development
and, therefore, as not valid.

The **Pharisees** on the other hand were a lay movement in Israel.

They largely resented Roman rule and sought release from its oppression.

The Pharisees put great stock in the oral traditions of the rabbis

and were sticklers for the law in every area of everyday life.

They were rivals in many areas--

about as similar as Pentecostal snake handlers from Kentucky

and Greek Orthodox bishops from Athens.

But in one respect they were united--

they both rejected the ministry of Jesus.

To the Pharisees Jesus was a religious radical who perverted the law of God,

and he was leading the people astray.

And to the Sadducees Jesus was a political troublemaker

who could stir up the Roman authorities against them.

And so here we see these two parties joining forces in opposition to Jesus.

16:1--"The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus

and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven."

Again, this is not the first time this has happened--

back in chap. 12 this same request was made by some Pharisees.

But here the tension seems even higher--

the Pharisees are now joined by the establishment from Jerusalem

represented by the Sadducees.

And instead of just asking him for a sign,

this request is given as a *test*.

In other words, they weren't coming as interested *inquirers*,

looking for answers.

No, their minds were already made up--

they came as *inquisitors*,

poised to condemn their victim.

In response to the work of God in Christ,

theirs is the reaction of "no faith"—

they are obstinately resistant;

they are blind to what is happening right before their very eyes.

They are very good at predicting the weather--

they could see what a day would bring well enough.

But they had failed to recognize the day of the Lord—

the dawning of his kingdom in mercy and love.

The mute were speaking,

the crippled made well,

the lame walking and the blind seeing.

This was a great day in the purposes of God,

full of the sunshine of his love and grace.

But for them it was to be a day of gloom and doom.

And the judgment that they are prepared to render

is exactly the judgment they are to receive.

"A wicked and adulterous generation" Jesus calls them.

That's the same description given to the Israelites in the time of Moses

who saw the great acts of God in bringing them out of Egypt

but who refused to trust him

to bring them into the promised land (Dt. 32:5,20).

In their unbelief, they were "a wicked and adulterous generation."

There will be no miracle-on-demand given to these people.

God doesn't operate in that way.

These Jewish leaders were putting God in the dock,

and they were standing as his judges.

But he wouldn't be subject to their rules, or their judgment.

They had it backwards.

Those who come to God must first humble themselves.

They must be willing to receive what he offers--

he sets the terms of the relationship, not them.

This kind of demand came from unbelieving and hardened hearts,

minds closed to what God had already revealed in Jesus. /

Yes, there would be a sign to come--

as Jonah entered into the realm of death, when swallowed by a great fish,

so Jesus, the Son of Man, would experience death itself,

yet like Jonah he would be saved from it by the hand of God.

That was the sign that *would* be given--

Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead--

but even that, like Jonah's experience,
would have to be received by faith on the testimony of others.

But if they don't attend to the sign that has already been given
they will not attend to that one.

There's no getting around it--

you *will* not believe unless you are *willing* to believe.

God won't bow to *your* demands--

you must bow to *his*.

But this is what the Pharisees and Sadducees would not do.

So we read in v. 4--

"Jesus then left them and went away."

This, I believe, is more than just a description of Jesus' physical movements--

this is a picture of the Lord turning away from a sinful people--

leaving them to their own devices.

It is a picture of God's judgment on the leaders of Israel.

This is all that anyone in this category of "No-Faith,"

those who are obstinately resistant,

can expect.

God will leave them and go away.

They don't want anything to do with him,

so he won't have anything to do with them.

But since he is the source of all light, and life, and love--

all they can expect is an existence that is best described by that word "hell"—
a wretched place,
a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth,
that realm of eternal darkness,
and a second death,
a place devoid of all love.

Now, remember--these were very religious people.

They weren't atheists--

secular people who had no time for spiritual activities in their lives.

They were, in fact, considered the most godly people of their time.

But they failed to recognize the "signs of the times."

God was at work, and they refused to join in.

The kingdom was dawning,

but they wanted to preserve their own kingdom--

the way of religion as they thought fit and proper--

and so they missed the day of God's appearance in their midst.

Judgment is upon them.

Let this be a warning to all of us--

True religion is not self-made--

it's not creating a God who fits our agenda,

our idea of what God ought to be.

True religion is about responding to the God who is--

responding in faith to the God who reveals himself

through his word in the world.

And that word of God in the world is centered in Jesus Christ.

If we turn away from what God reveals to us in his Son,

he has nothing left to say to us.

In the end, all he will say is **"Away from me, you evil doers. I never knew you."** /

That's one reaction to the signs of the times in our passage this morning--

but there's another.

If the reaction of the Pharisees and Sadducees is one of **"No-Faith,"**

then the reaction of the disciples is one of **"Little-Faith."**

I will describe them as the **"Immaturely Confused."**

Look at vv. 5-12.

"When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread," we read.

Just think about the context here--

they had just been involved in the feeding of perhaps 10,000 people

including women and children.

Everyone had eaten more than enough, and there were basketfuls left over.

Bread was everywhere!

Now they are going across the lake,

and they realize they don't have any bread.

And evidently, they were pretty concerned about this.

And in that situation, Jesus says to them,

"Be careful."

Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

They're still thinking about bread--that's all they can think about--

but in talking about "**yeast**," Jesus is referring to something else.

They just don't get it--

v. 7--"**They discussed this among themselves**"

and concluded, Jesus must have said this

"because we didn't bring any bread."

8 Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked,

"You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves

about having no bread?

9 **Do you still not understand?**

Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand,

and how many basketfuls you gathered?

10 **Or the seven loaves for the four thousand,**

and how many basketfuls you gathered?

11 **How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread?**

"You of little faith,"--

Your heads are still filled with physical concerns--**Bread**.

Haven't you understood that your Father in heaven

knows that you need those things?

Haven't you seen that demonstrated right before your eyes"--

and yet you still fret and agonize over such things.

"Do you still not understand?"

As Jesus had said to them before,

**"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness
and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt. 6:33).**

Jesus doesn't reject his disciples for their little faith,

but he does seem exasperated--

"Do you still not understand?"

"How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread?"

Can't you see who I am,

and can't you understand what that means for you?

You can share with me in knowing God as your Father in heaven.

who will protect you

and provide for you as his own sons and daughters.

Don't be like the Pharisees and Sadducees.

These disciples of Jesus aren't spiritually **blind**,

they are just spiritually **dull**.

And instead of words of *judgment*,

Jesus speaks to them in words of **warning**--

"Be careful," Jesus says.

"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

v. 12—"Then they understood that he was **not** telling them

to guard against the yeast used in bread,

but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

“Yeast” or “leaven” in the Jewish mind was a bad thing—

Before the Passover all yeast was to be purged from the house,
and nothing containing yeast was to be sacrificed to the Lord (Ex. 23:18).

Yeast represented moral corruption that creeps in almost unnoticed
and then spreads throughout the community (1 Cor. 5:6-8).

Jesus warns his disciples to shun the yeast,

the teaching, of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

And what is this “**teaching**”?

As we said, there wasn't a lot of agreement about what those two groups taught.

But they were united in one thing—

they were united in their rejection of Jesus as God's Messiah.

They refused to recognize him as the way, the truth, and the life.

They did not come to him as their Savior,

as the one who could meet their deepest need.

They were rejecting the “**signs of the times**”—

that visible demonstration of who Jesus was.

Hasn't that been our theme during this Advent season

as we have been looking at these various interactions of people with Jesus

in the Gospel of Matthew?

Most of these are conflict stories—

episodes in which Jesus is misperceived or misrepresented,

or simply resented by various people for things that he said and did.

Jesus just didn't conform to their perceptions of the way things ought to be—

he violated their rules,

he didn't meet their expectations,

he transgressed their boundaries.

His disciples plucked grain and ate as they walked on the Sabbath,

and they were scandalized,

but Jesus declared himself Lord of the Sabbath.

He even healed a man on the Sabbath—

how dare he do such a thing!

His opponents were blind to the truth

and they accused Jesus of operating

under the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons.

His own townspeople rejected him—

Who does he think he is—

we know him—he's the carpenter's son—

we know his mother and his family.

And they were offended by him.

Their familiarity bred contempt.

Jesus refused to observe their sacred traditions—

like washing their hands before eating--

traditions which they kept above the law of God.

An unclean Canaanite woman showed more spiritual insight

than all these religious leaders combined,

and Jesus commended her faith.

All they could do was demand that Jesus give them some sign from heaven
to justify himself.

But Jesus would have none of it—

None will be given except the sign of Jonah—

when he would be raised from the grave.

But he knew that even that would not do it.

Their minds were made up,

their hearts were hardened.

their wills would not be moved.

They were corrupted by fear and jealousy,

and they would not receive what God had now revealed.

They rejected Jesus,

and he had no choice but to turn away from them.

This is the “**teaching**” of the Pharisees and Sadducees—

and Jesus warns his disciples to beware

lest the yeast of this teaching creep into their hearts

and blind their eyes to the truth of who he was

hardening their hearts

from following him in faith. /

Who is he in yonder stall?

Who is this Jesus?

and why does it matter?—

that's what these Gospel books are all about—

And that's just where Matthew goes in the very next episode he recounts
after the warning given to the disciples.

Beginning in v. 13—

he asked his disciples, **“Who do people say that I, the Son of Man, am?”**

**They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah;
and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”**

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

There is no more important question.

Jesus asks each one of us—

“Who do you say I am?”

How do you answer that question?

We've read about lots of people—very religious people—who got it wrong.

What about you?

You have all the evidence you need—

you have the reliable testimony of the Gospel writers,

you have the witness of history,

you even have the sign of Jonah—

Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Jesus asks each one of us today,

“Who do you say I am?”

Think about it—

the implications of this one simple question are enormous
and they are eternal.

Your whole conception of who God is
and how you relate to him hinges on how you answer it.

May you answer as Simon Peter did,

“You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16).

As we begin this new year,

I want you to be observant of the signs of the times--

not the newspaper reports of some stock market crash or Middle Eastern war.

I mean the far more significant signs that have already been given to us in Jesus Christ--

the signs that he is the bringer of the Kingdom,

that he has defeated the devil on the cross,

taking away our sin,

and he has risen from the dead

to give us new life.

These are the signs that matter.

These are the signs that cry out for a renewed faith in our lives.

Let's live in the light of these signs--

for they point us straight to the love and power of our Father in heaven.

Prayer—

John 20:28—When Jesus appeared to Thomas,

he said to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed;

blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples,

which are not recorded in this book.

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,

and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Closing Song: #17 *We Come, O Christ, to You* [vv. 1,2,4,5

Benediction:

2Ths. 2:16 May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father,

who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope,

encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

Dec. 29, 2019

**"Misperceptions of Jesus--
Jesus: The Misunderstood Teacher"
Matt. 15:29-16:12**

Church history is full of "prophets" who thought they could discern the "signs of the times" and predict the coming of Christ. But when that phrase occurs in the New Testament it refers not to some future period for us, but to a present period in the ministry of Jesus. This morning we consider the "signs of the times" given in Matt. 15:29-39 before considering two reactions to them in 16:1-12, and the one response they call for in our lives.

I. The Signs of the Times (15:29-39)--

Jesus brings the Kingdom of God into the world.

II. Two Reactions (16:1-12)--

A. The Jewish Leaders: Obstinate Resistant

**The "No-Faith" of Blindness,
Issuing in Judgment (16:1-4)**

B. Jesus' Disciples: Immaturely Confused

The "Little-Faith" of Dullness,
Issuing in Warning (16:5-12)

Jesus' central question in the Gospel—

“Who do you say that I am?” (Mt. 16:15)

Sermon Response:

**"Misperceptions of Jesus--
Jesus: The Misunderstood Teacher"**

Matt. 15:29-16:12

•Read Exod. 16; Num 11:4-9; 2Kings 4:1-7, 42-44; Isa. 25:6-8; 29:18f; 35:5f. How do the events of Matt. 15:29-39 point to the significance of Jesus' ministry? How do they help us as we look with hope toward the future? cf. Matt. 8:11.

•Read 16:1-4. Why were the leaders of Israel unable to discern the "signs of the times"? Do you know people who are very competent in one area (i.e., they are able to discern the weather), but who cannot grasp spiritual realities? Pray that the Lord may be gracious to them and open their minds to his truth.

•How is it possible that these disciples who had seen Jesus feed a great multitude not once but twice, could be so concerned about bread? Isn't it a matter of living in the present? How do you do that? What concerns dominate your thoughts? Take them to the Lord in prayer--cf. Phil. 4:6,7.

•Read 16:8. Why are these disciples so slow to understand? Would Jesus describe you as one of "little faith"? Why? What would he call you to remember as encouragements to trust in the provision of your Father in heaven? Do that now, and determine to live in faith in his love and grace.

•What are some of the many implications of believing that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God?

