

## A Demand for a Sign – Matthew 16:1-12

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### Two conflicts

In today's passage, we see Jesus having two conflicts with two different groups of people. In the first instance, two groups of Jewish religious leaders - the Pharisees and the Sadducees - challenge Jesus and his authority. In the second instance, Jesus' disciples miss the point of what he is saying, and Jesus has to show them how wrong they are.

### The Pharisees and the Sadducees demand a sign

Our first conflict starts at the beginning of today's passage, where we read:

*Matthew 16:1* The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.

These two groups of Jewish religious leaders come up to Jesus, and they're basically just there to pick a fight. They want Jesus to show them a sign, otherwise known as a miracle, that will prove to them that he is the Messiah, sent by God. They're challenging his authority. Jesus' response to them is a little bit cryptic, but he essentially says "no, you guys should already know who I am". In the book of Matthew so far Jesus has done a lot of miracles - even the story immediately before this one is a pretty big miracle where Jesus healed lots of people over three days, and then fed four thousand people with seven loaves of bread. This is why Jesus comments on the Pharisees and Sadducees saying "you know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times". Jesus had been out and about, publicly doing miracles to show everyone that he was God, but these religious leaders weren't able to connect the dots and work out who he was. This is particularly bad because the religious leaders are exactly the ones who should have been able to recognise him as God. The book of Isaiah in the Old Testament speaks of God coming to heal the blind and the lame, and Jesus' most recent miracle of feeding the crowds is reminiscent of God giving the Israelites manna in the wilderness. Jesus has already given these religious leaders enough signs to be able to know who he is, they just haven't been paying attention to them. Jesus doesn't just say "no" to their challenge. He actually does promise one sign: the sign of Jonah. He doesn't elaborate on this, but if you've read through Matthew recently, or if you can remember our sermons from the end of 2018, this phrase might sound familiar. This is because back in Matthew 12, Jesus has an incredibly similar interaction with some other religious leaders:

*Matthew 12:38-40* Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." <sup>39</sup> He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. <sup>40</sup> For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

This confrontation starts out almost exactly the same as today's passage, but Jesus continues on to give more details about the "sign of Jonah". I'm sure this would have been confusing to everyone at the time, but we can now see that Jesus was talking here about his death and resurrection. The sign that will prove that Jesus is God is that he will die, and then three days later come back to life in the same body. This is something that no human can do - only God can. The truest sign that Jesus is God will come, but given they've not done a good job of interpreting the other signs, will they be able to see this one?

## The disciples miss the point

After this confrontation, Jesus leaves the religious leaders and goes with his disciples to the other side of the lake, where Jesus gives his disciples a warning:

**Matthew 16:6** *“Be careful,” Jesus said to them. “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”*

The disciples, true to form, completely miss the point of what Jesus is saying. They think he's worried about what food they're going to eat, because they forgot to bring any bread. Maybe they think that the Pharisees and Sadducees will try to poison them, and Jesus wants them to be on their guard. Whatever they were thinking, Jesus wasn't happy about it. He wasn't talking about bread, and he made sure that the disciples knew it! He not-so-gently corrects them, explaining to them that he was not talking about bread at all. As a side note, I love how annoyed Jesus seems in this passage. It's just such a human response to people who just don't at all get what you're talking about.

**Matthew 16:9b-11a** *Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? <sup>10</sup> Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? <sup>11</sup> How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread?*

The disciples are not at all on the same wavelength as Jesus. They're sitting here worried about bread, forgetting that Jesus has just fed thousands and thousands of people by miraculously creating bread and fish. Jesus isn't at all concerned by their ability to find food. The disciples take this correction on board, and then they realise: Jesus didn't mean the literal yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees, he was talking about their teaching. We don't actually know that much about the teaching of these particular religious groups, but given the context that Matthew has given us here in this Gospel it seems likely that Jesus' main concern is that the disciples will doubt who he is, and what he is doing. He wants the disciples to be on their guard against whatever the Pharisees and the Sadducees have to say about him.

## A misplaced focus

In both of these stories, we see Jesus interacting with people who are focusing on the wrong thing. For both the Jewish leaders and the disciples, they are unable to see who Jesus is, and understand what he is saying, because they are too focused on the "here and now". This is most clearly seen in Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus explicitly calls out their skill at judging what is going on in the physical world around them:

**Matthew 16:2-3** *He replied, “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ <sup>3</sup> and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*

These religious leaders care about the weather: they care enough that they're even able to predict what the weather is going to be like, by looking at the sky. When it comes to things of real spiritual significance, though - like God coming to rescue his people - they miss even really obvious signs. They see Jesus performing miracles, but they can't connect them to what they know of God to realise who Jesus is. The Pharisees and the Sadducees have spent too much time focusing on the "here and now": the Pharisees focused on living righteously according to God's law, and the Sadducees focused on building social and political power. Both of

these groups, despite being a part of God's chosen people, had become so preoccupied by these things that they missed God himself in their midst. This preoccupation extends even to Jesus' disciples. Despite the fact that they've been with him for years, they're so focused on what they're going to eat that they fail to understand what Jesus is saying. Notice that his correction of them isn't "you forgetful disciples", but rather "you of little faith". Jesus doesn't care that the disciples forgot the bread - he cares that they're worried about the bread instead of trusting him. The disciples are so focused on their present circumstances that they can't understand what Jesus is trying to teach them. Luckily, Jesus doesn't leave them in this state. He rebukes them, and points out the ridiculousness of their concern. This reminder helps the disciples to shift their focus away from their present physical concerns, to see the spiritual concern that Jesus has for them - that they continue to follow and trust him. I don't think it's a coincidence that the next story after this has Peter declare that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. What the Pharisees and the Sadducees couldn't see because of their preoccupation, Peter was able to see once Jesus helped him to look beyond his physical circumstances, in the "here and now", to see the spiritual reality that lay before him.

## **Our misplaced focus**

This misplaced focus on the "here and now" continues to be a problem for Christians today. Our great God has made us as physical creatures, so we can't escape from this physical world around us. It is good for us to understand, manipulate, and even enjoy the world around us, but we must take care to not let the physical world distract us from the spiritual realities that we know in Jesus Christ. Take another look at verses two and three of today's passage:

***Matthew 16:2-3** He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,'<sup>3</sup> and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. ()*

Jesus' criticism isn't that the Pharisees and Sadducees are able to interpret the appearance of the sky, it's that they can't interpret the signs of the times. Jesus doesn't expect them to be clueless about the physical world, but he does expect them to understand the spiritual world. Similarly, it's not wrong for us to understand the world around us. It is only by understanding the world around us that we're able to build things like tables, chairs, phones, computers, the Internet, ... and everything else. Our entire society is built on our understanding of the world and how it works, and that is a good thing! By understanding the world we can provide for ourselves and others, and we can bring honour to God. Where we can go wrong is when we are so focused on the physical world that we forget who Jesus Christ is, and miss what he is trying to teach us.

In his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul gives a warning the Christians in Corinth not to get distracted away from Jesus Christ, urging them with these words:

***Colossians 3:1-4** Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.<sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.<sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.<sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ()*

Paul wanted the Colossians to set their hearts and their minds on things above. To focus themselves on Jesus Christ, and on the eternal life that we look forward to with him. This is just as applicable to us today as

it was to them: we, too, should have our hearts set on heaven, and on Jesus Christ. There are so many things that can turn our hearts and minds away from heaven, though. The Pharisees, the Sadducees, and Jesus' disciples were all focused on the wrong thing, but at least they had Jesus in front of them! We can't physically see and talk to Jesus, so it can be even harder for us to keep our hearts set on heaven. We also live in a world that is aggressively trying to capture our attention. Whether it's billboards that we drive past, headlines on news articles, or addictive apps on our phones, it seems like everywhere we look we see another thing vying for our attention. Did you know that technology companies hire psychologists to work out how to make their apps more "engaging", so that you'll pay more attention to them? In order to keep our hearts and minds set on heaven, we need to make sure that we aren't letting all of these other distractions crowd out our thoughts about Jesus Christ, and our eternal life with him. We need to make sure we have time, and attention, to reflect on and contemplate who we know Jesus Christ to be, and our hope for future with him.

One of our modern Christian practices is "quiet times", or "devotions", as a time where we read the Bible and reflect on it, asking the Holy Spirit for help as we do so. This is wonderful! This is a great practice to help us to keep our minds set on heaven. If you aren't already in the practice of taking time out of your day for a "quiet time", then I would recommend that you start doing so. Taking even just ten minutes a day to take time out and refocus your attention onto "things above" can make a big difference. We have so many other customs and practices as Christians that are designed to help us focus on Jesus Christ: church services, sermons, small group Bible studies, conventions, and more! All these things present opportunities for us to refocus ourselves on Jesus, and on heaven. Having all of these regular features can be really helpful, but there's also a trap that we can fall into. It's all too easy to go through the motions of these things without ever really focusing on Jesus. It can be easy to read the Bible, connect in to church, listen to a sermon, or even attend a Bible study, and then immediately forget about it. What wasted opportunities!

Refocusing ourselves to Jesus doesn't "just happen", even with all of these great moments to help. It requires us to intentionally engage, and to be "present". To use these opportunities to fill our minds with thoughts about Jesus, and his promises to us, and to set our hearts on him. Why don't you start with this sermon? Set aside ten minutes for yourself later today, or maybe tomorrow, to think again about this sermon. Think about what things in your life distract you away from Jesus, and think about what you can do to set your heart on Jesus, who is in heaven.