

Sermons on Matthew

The Signs of the Times

Matthew 16:1-4

With Study Questions

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Matthew 16:1-4

Then the __Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. ⁻²⁻ He answered and said to them, “_When it is evening you say, ‘_It will be fair weather, for the sky is red_’; ⁻³⁻ and in the morning, ‘_It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening._’ __Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot *discern* the signs of the times. ⁻⁴⁻ __A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of __the prophet Jonah._” And He left them and departed. (Matthew 16:1-4)

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Testing Jesus

Here the world of clerical academia approaches Jesus to put Him to the test. These two sects of Judaism (the Pharisees who were more conservative and proletariat, and the Sadducees who were more liberal and aristocratic) were generally at odds with each other. Few things function better than a common enemy to bring unity; in this case the common enemy is Jesus.

Being teachers of the law, they were at ease testing Jesus. Why should He receive more privilege than others? Testing (πειραζω - peirazo) can be administered in a good sense but also in an evil “trap” sense, which seems to be the case here. The devil is the tempter/tester (same word) in Matthew 4:3. We also are told not to put God to the test in Matthew 4:7 (same word).

Observe the pinnacle of religious and academic hubris—testing Jesus! It wouldn’t be so abhorrent if a scintilla of sincerity were dwelling in their request. But Jesus had already performed numerous signs before thousands of people and, similar to Pharaoh who observed the undeniable omnipotence of God, it had succeeded in merely hardening their hearts.

Jesus would not perform for them. But He would appeal to something they knew and for which they had received a great deal of public respect—knowledge of the Scriptures.

He answered and said to them, “_When it is evening you say, ‘_It will be fair weather, for the sky is red_’; ⁻³⁻ and in the morning, ‘_It

***will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening. _
_Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you
cannot discern the signs of the times. (Matthew 16:2, 3)***

Hard-Hearted Students

These were theologians, not meteorologists, yet they were better at discerning weather than Scripture. ‘Red sky at night, sailor’s delight; red sky in the morning, sailor’s warning.’ Maybe they should have considered a career change.

According to Jesus, their problem was not intellectual—at least not primarily. They were hypocrites! They were playing the role, honoring God with their lips but their hearts were far from God (Matthew 15:18). This was no honest error on their parts. This sort of theological ignorance is not a result of intellectual limitations.

**-This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should
__no longer walk as __the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the
futility of their mind, ⁻¹⁸⁻ having their understanding
darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of
the ignorance that is in them, because of the __blindness of
their heart.
(Ephesians 4:17, 18)**

They knew all too well who Jesus was and what His presence signified. But they suppressed that truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18).

That it Might Be Fulfilled

After the wise men had visited the baby Jesus, Herod gathered the chief priests to inquire where the Christ was to be born (Matthew 2:4). Numerous times throughout Matthew he records the words, “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophet.” A student of the Scriptures with even a cursory knowledge of the birth, life, teachings and actions of Jesus would have to make every effort to miss who He was and what “times” they were in.

Emperor’s New Clothes

There does seem to be an “emperor’s new clothes” mentality when it comes to things spiritual. I’ll often watch popular theologians on television with stadiums full of thousands. We all have our minor differences, but sometimes these presentations border on the moronic. Then the camera pans the audience full of people who at least give the appearance of being well-educated, successful people (the budget of some of these ministries betray the reality of the financially successful people behind them).

But there does not seem to be the same scrutiny applied to their understanding of the things of God as there is to their understanding of the things of business. Perhaps their schedules do not allow them to undertake the necessary study. Perhaps they think the same rules of logic and wisdom don’t apply to spiritual things as to other pursuits. Either way, the results are devastating when the masses find themselves at the mercy of shoddy theologians.

What Times?

But what of these “times”? I found it both interesting and troubling that theologians for whom I have a great deal of respect (not the ones I just wrote of) seem to launch into rather bizarre speculations when it comes to these “times”.

John MacArthur, for example, holds the opinion that the “times” Jesus speaks of in this passage is most likely the time in which we currently live. Of this passage MacArthur writes,

All of those signs that mark the end times are characteristic of our day. There can be no doubt that we live near the end of the age...¹

Frankly, this is the popular opinion in modern western evangelicalism, what with the *Left Behind* novel series being a primary influence in today’s theology. But does this fit with the context of the passage, of the gospels?

What kind of exegesis is required for us to look at this text and come to the conclusion that Jesus is speaking of 2006? Was Jesus not speaking of the “time of their (your) visitation”?

¹ MacArthur, John *the MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Matthew 16-23*(p. 7) (1988), the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago.

Now as He drew near, He saw the city and __wept over it, ⁻⁴²⁻ saying, “_If you had known, even you, especially in this __your day, the things *that* __make for your __peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁻⁴³⁻ For days will come upon you when your enemies will __build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, ⁻⁴⁴⁻ __and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and __they will not leave in you one stone upon another, __because you did not know the time of your visitation_.”
(Luke 19:41-44)

Time does not allow me to pursue an entire eschatological schematic. Suffice it to say that the Pharisees missed the day of their visitation, not the day or our visitation. The sign of the times they could not discern was not the events taking place two thousand years removed from the conversation.

I am quick to state (because of the monstrous errors and false assumption and accusations surrounding this passage and the ones like it) that the Scriptures do speak of a Second Coming of Christ and a final Day of Judgment and resurrection—but this is not one of those Scriptures.

This passage speaks of the judgment that fell upon the nation of Israel for their rejection, persecution and execution of Jesus thus ending the Old Covenant and beginning the new—the stones Jesus speaks of are the stones which make up the temple (the hub of Old Covenant worship). There were eternal, judgmental consequences for this; but the judgment, in a historical sense was something that happened in that generation.

**__A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of __the prophet Jonah._”
And He left them and departed. (Matthew 16:4)**

Adulterers Want a Sign

Adulterers want signs because they are not faithful. They want a phone call or some signal so they can remove the evidence of their infidelity. Christian pragmatism can be its own form of demanding a sign.

I thoroughly enjoyed the works of Francis Schaeffer in the seventies and early eighties. He became very popular in his efforts to help Christianity take its rightful place as a culture shifting force. But I fear his popularity was more a result of desperation than of biblical faith.

At the end of the sixties, the fire of debauchery was at our feet and we needed some answers. Our children were drowning in a pool of licentiousness, while our nation's legislation approved and rewarded blatant immorality and systems which were ungodly at their core. I fear much of the positive response to Schaeffer was a result of wanting things "the way they used to be" rather than a pursuit of pure biblical Christianity.

Of course this is a much milder form of what we read of in this passage. These aren't people who believe in Jesus trying to figure out how it all works. These are people who have wickedly denied what they know to be true. Theirs is the most detestable form of the sin of unbelief (Hebrews 3:12).

Ineffective Signs

Jesus will not give them a sign. Signs are thoroughly ineffective when it comes to transforming the human heart from stone to flesh. No doubt the signs of Christ served their purpose in sufficiently capturing the eye of those who, by the grace of God, had an unprejudiced heart in observing them.

But signs, no matter how miraculous, apart from God's Spirit effectively working in the heart of man will yield only the testimony of Voltaire:

Even if a miracle should be wrought in the open marketplace before a thousand sober witnesses, I would rather mistrust my sense than admit a miracle.

There is many an atheist who boasts that they have merely chosen to suspend all judgment until all the evidence is in and the facts can be fully ascertained. Two questions: What would suffice as evidence, and how would you determine whether it was from God?

The same atheist lives in this world with unshakable faith in numerous immaterial, moral concepts and patterns which he cannot possibly explain apart from acknowledging the existence of God. It would appear that atheists merely hold in suspension things which are convenient to their basic assumptions about life.

Two Types of Argumentation

Proverbs mentions two types of argumentation. Jesus employs them both in this conversation.

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him. ⁵ Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes. (Proverbs 26:4, 5)

Jesus answers His detractors by answering them in terms they should have understood and acknowledged. He appealed to something they flaunted—their own righteousness and knowledge of the Scriptures.

This is a valuable and effective apologetic—what some call a negative apologetic. To listen and temporarily/hypothetically adopt a person's world view merely to perform a *reductio ad absurdum* (reduce to absurdity).

For example, those who boast that they refuse to believe in anything that can't observe need to be shown that they believe in many things they cannot observe, including the logic necessary for that very statement to be valid.

One Last Sign

But in the final analysis Jesus does not answer the fool according to his folly. He says He will grant them one more sign—the sign of Jonah. Matthew had already explained this.

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12:40)

Jesus will not answer the human race according to its own folly. He continually demonstrated that His detractors were hypocritical and duplicitous sophists. But Jesus would not become the ultimate sophist. He would leave a sign for the human race, the sign of His own death and resurrection.

We are informed by the Apostle Paul that every time we partake in the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the Lord's Death until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26).

These men saw the sign of Jonah and they responded by bribing the soldiers who were commissioned to guard the tomb of Jesus (Matthew 28:11-15). Some responses are wrapped in much fancier attire, but at their heart, they are all the same—a rejection of something known to be true. May God give us the grace to see and embrace the truth and hope of Christ.

Questions for Study

1. Who were the Pharisees and Sadducees (page 2)?
2. Isn't always wrong to be tested (pages 2, 3)?
3. What should the Pharisees and Sadducees have been able to discern and why (pages 3, 4)?
4. Why were the Pharisees and Sadducees unable to discern the times (pages 3, 4)?

5. Discuss some of the reasons why people might embrace unsound theology (page 4).
6. Discuss the differing views of the “times” Jesus is speaking of in this passage. What are the varying strengths and weaknesses of the opposing views (pages 4, 5)?
7. Why do adulterers want a sign? Discuss the example concerning Francis Schafer (page 6).
8. To what extent are signs actually effective in changing someone’s heart (page 7)?
9. What two types of arguments did Jesus use in this dialogue (pages 7, 8)?
10. What sign has history been given (page 8)?