

Seeing Christ Clearly

Matthew 16:1-12

Introduction

Magic: I'm a sucker for illusions. Close up magic, card, tricks, etc. In college, our campus ministry brought a world-famous Christian illusionist to do a show on campus (shiny Vegas outfit, etc.). It takes skill, practice, etc. But I remember my eyes being opened to a few things (NDA setup, mirrors, etc.). Once you know the trick (or the misdirection), you start to see what is happening. It's amazing how simple some of the tricks are once you see how they work.

Trick Plays: Trick plays in sports. It's amazing how much different life is once you can see clearly with a God-given perspective. When difficulty and problems don't distract you from God's purpose for you, you can even see how difficult circumstances serve as a blessing to help you focus on what really matters.

- Can you see this as a blessing?

New Series: We're back in the gospel of Matthew. In the next few weeks, our goal is to cut through all the noise of life, the distractions, and try to **see Christ clearly**.

- The problems of our community are numerous. And the gospel compels us to love our neighbors in real and tangible ways, but the best gift we can give our community is to be a gospel-formed community.

Main Point: What do you need to start or stop doing in order to focus your attention more clearly on Christ?

- What do you need to know, believe, plan for, reject, run from, etc.?
- What would change in your life, in our city, in our neighborhood if we saw Christ?

¹ And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ² He answered 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 stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. ⁴ An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." So he left them and departed. ⁵ When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶ Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ⁷ And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." ⁸ But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? ⁹ Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹ How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ¹² Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

1. Are you blind to the things of God? (vv. 1-4)

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Fairly Odd Frienemies: ¹ And the Pharisees and Sadducees came The Pharisees and Sadducees are an odd pairing. They don’t agree on much theologically or politically (both on the Sanhedrin with the Sadducees as the majority and the Pharisees as the populist minority).

- Pharisees focused on lifestyle purity (obeying the law, adding extra commandments, legalism, etc.). The Sadducees were focused on maintaining national identity and political power (temple rituals, etc.). The Sadducees had influence among the rich; the Pharisees had influence among the larger population).
- Sadducees lived for political and social approval; the Pharisees separated themselves as “holier-than-thou.” One sought success apart from God and the other asserted themselves as the arbiters of godliness.
 - Yet neither recognized God in the flesh come to save them (religion, rebellion ≠ gospel).
- For them to come together (the enemy of my enemy is my friend) shows just how much they hated Jesus. Sin not only makes you *stupid* it pushes you to the wrong kind of allies.

I Saw the Sign: and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. This section has a lot of similarities to 12:38-45. Signs are not always bad. God gives us signs (“and this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger”). Jesus’ miracles (particularly in John) are specifically called signs.

- We are called to receive and recognize God’s signs but the Pharisees and Sadducees are **demanding** a sign for the purpose of **testing** (e.g., tripping up) Jesus.
- What does this look like for us? When you say things like “I’ll follow you if…” you are demanding a sign of God (Gideon is a bad example). The demand for a sign from God dangerously flips the script, putting you in the place of God. We exist to serve him (not vice versa).
- And, here’s the truth, there is a greater blessing in believing Jesus without requiring undue proof. **We can trust fully without understanding completely.**
- But here’s the grace of God, *he has given us sign upon sign, proof upon proof.* He has proven himself completely (but, for those who refuse to believe it is never enough).

Read the Doppler but Not the Room: ² He answered 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 stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. Jesus shows how these Pharisees can observe the sky but can’t

interpret the multitude of signs he has given. They can discern the weather but not Jesus' identity.

- We can discover endless new uses for technology, we can dissect the latest political opinions, we can distinguish a myriad of celebrity scandals but we miss the clear direction of God's hand in our world?
- We can spend hours watching Youtube™, memorizing sports stats, playing video games, curating our social media, and yet we have little time or attention for the things of God.

Sign of Jonah: ⁴ An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." What is the sign of Jonah? The sign of Jonah is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Just as Jonah was three days in the grave of the fish's belly, so Jesus will die and be raised on the third day.

- The Pharisees are unconvinced by Jesus' own claims about himself.
- They're unconvinced even though he has cured the demon-possessed.
- They're unconvinced even though he has healed the blind.

Here's the truth, even his resurrection from the dead will fail to convince them because they **refuse to believe** (e.g., Rich Man and Lazarus, Lk 16:31: "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead").

- Resurrection from the dead *should* be sufficient but, for those who don't want to see, it won't be enough.
- "It is no surprise that the NT speaks of our salvation as a power encounter. For God must enter the world we have fabricated for ourselves and illumine its fraudulence. He must sever the link with the powers of darkness" (David F. Wells). Very often, disbelief is not a failure of evidence but an unwillingness to relinquish control of our lives to God. Many don't see because they don't want to see (e.g., people blind to their kid's behavior).

Damning Indictment: So he left them and departed. Their refusal to accept what is right in front of them leads to the greatest punishment of all, God left them. Their unbelief was met by the absence of God. You and I were made by God and for God. There is no greater pain or punishment than his absence. To be cast from his presence is a punishment greater than any disease or calamity.

2. Do you misunderstand the message of Christ? (vv. 5-11)

⁵ When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶ Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ⁷ And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." ⁸ But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? ⁹ Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹ How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

Circumstance: ⁵ When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶ Jesus said to them, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Jesus is warning his disciples about the danger of the Pharisees and Sadducees (of their testing of him, of their unbelief, etc.) *but they are not on the same wavelength as him*. He’s using leaven as a metaphor and all they can think of is the fact that they forgot food. They miss his message for two reasons:

1. Distracted: ⁷ And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, “We brought no bread.” They had food on their minds. I certainly can sympathize (talk about food and watch my mouth water, Pavlovian). They are focused on the temporal and blind to the eternal.

- They are distracted by their desires. This is a symptom of a larger problem: “Me-Church Theology.” Because something feels important to us, we think it must be important to God (or it must have the same priority to God as it has to us).
 - Can set the GPS map to revolve around you (the human state) or for you to turn in relation to it. There are two kinds of people: people who think the map revolves around them and vice versa. This is probably why humans (without other indication) assumed that the earth was the center of the universe. Maybe this is why it is not! God knew we couldn’t handle being the center.
- “If you draw theological conclusions by asking what you’d do if you were God, then you’re often going to get the wrong answer.” Theology can’t start with me
- Disciples miss Jesus’ point. We often do the same thing. We turn gathered worship and reading the Bible into a religious checklist rather than an invitation to commune with the living God. *Don’t miss the point.*
- **What is distracting you from the heart of God?**

2. Forgetful: ⁸ But Jesus, aware of this, said, “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? ⁹ Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? He miraculously fed thousands of people from a few fish and loaves (twice!). Yet they’re worried about whether they have food. They were forgetting the provision he had shown in the past and, as a result, failing to remember he can and will provide for them in the future.

- They saw the miracle but missed the Messiah. They experienced his power yet missed the person of whom the power testified.

Abundant Provision: How many baskets you gathered?

- I know that all of us can testify of the abundant provision of God (e.g., adoption giving, Coronavirus financials, big gift to RH).

Satan’s Strategy: Satan would just as soon distract rather than derail you. If the disciples had understood the miracles Jesus did in the past, they would’ve understood his message in the present. “The disciples’ understanding of the miracles remained at the level of material need;

they are so preoccupied with literal bread that their minds are not open to the more important spiritual truths which Jesus is trying convey” (France, *adapted*).

- And don't assume proximity equals understanding. God is gracious to lots of people who never get it. “[Think about] Judas: You can walk with Jesus and never receive the rest, welcome, and life he has for you.”
- I see people getting miracles and still not understanding. If you only knew all of the ways that God has provided for you. But instead, we often are like the Israelites, spurning God's deliverance and pining for the “good ole days” of Egypt.

Be Reminded: Have you forgotten? Count your blessings (cliche but true). Why do I think that God can provide in the past but not in the future? You and I suffer from spiritual amnesia. That's why the Bible spends so much time imploring us to *remember*. Remember where you were a year ago? Remember what God did when you thought there wasn't a way out.

- When did God provide?
- When did you meet God?
- When did God feel real and present? It's the same God now.
 - The same God who calmed the storm and fed the five thousand is the same God that walks with you today.

3. What does it look like to see clearly? (v. 12)

¹² Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The Gift of Sight: ¹² Then they understood What a gift when God gives us spiritual sight. So many things change when we see Christ clearly (e.g., a child who gets glasses for the first time).

- When we see Christ it illuminates the world around us. “I believe in Christ as I believe in the sun. Not because I can see it, but by it, I can see everything else” (C. S. Lewis).
- What would a little bit of clarity do for you?
- How do you and I see Christ clearly?

New (Old) Habits for a New Year: The most overused word of 2020 might have been “unprecedented.” And, because we think the world begins and ends with us, we forget that the church has been facing these challenges before.

- “Justin Martyr (AD 100–165) identified four major challenges to discipleship: (1) sexual immorality, (2) wealth, (3) magic, and (4) ethnic hatred. Substitute technology for magic and little has changed in almost 2,000 years” (Andy Crouch).

The church has been through plagues, pandemics, wars, recessions, and more. Some prognosticators think we need “new ways” of church and “new ways” of discipleship. And, in some sense they're right. Things *have* to change. The “way things are” does not seem to be working well for our spiritual vitality. But, the path to spiritual life is not new, it is old. The way ahead is to go back to the ways of Jesus. The path of discipleship is well-worn by saints who have gone before.

- Our “fix” is not in new technology, a new politician, or a new philosophy. An influx of cash, a new job, or a new relationship won’t change what we need it to.
- For many of us, 2020 has fogged up more than our glasses, it has blurred our vision of the goodness and grace of God. What we need is a clear, humble, grateful, and focused vision of Christ. We need to remember his provision and focus on his path.
- We need gospel clarity, renewed faith, and God-given perspective.

Tuning In:

- We can’t control a lot of things, but we can control our focus and we can eliminate our distractions.
 - What is the last thing you see before you go to bed or the first thing you look at in the morning? (TV, social media, etc.).
- “Tune in” to God (think of old timey radio; made the mistake of describing “tuning in” to teenagers that had never seen anything like that, and who knows when “hang up is gone”).
 - When we “tune in to God” we “tune out” of other channels in our lives. We focus. And the more we tune into God the more our hearts align with his (another metaphor of tuning using a guitar).
- Get back to the basics.

Read. God has spoken to us clearly and consistently in the Bible. He is not absent or silent, we have his very word in human language. The Bible is the story of God and, when you read it, it produces faith. It is the content of our confession and the soil of our growth in Christ. It paints the picture of the character and path of Christ that allows us to see him clearly.

Pray. Calvin called prayer the “chief exercise of faith.” Prayer is the place where we commune with the Father, where we enjoy what Jesus enjoyed, and where our hearts align with his heart.

- Remember in Matthew 9 where Jesus was traveling through the “cities and villages, teaching... and proclaiming the gospel” and he “saw the crowds” and “had compassion on them” because they were like “sheep without a shepherd.” Then he turned to his disciples and, before he they went anywhere or preached anything he told them to “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Why did he tell them to pray? *Because he wanted them to feel the same compassion for the crowds that he had.*
- When our lives are saturated in God’s word and turned to his heart the natural outcome is that we share the good news of his kingdom to everyone. We display and proclaim the gospel in every arena of life.

Share. We get to participate in God’s invitation to all people. We are the means by which God has chosen for the gospel to go out. Every believer here is empowered and commissioned to go and tell.

- Who do you know that is far from God but close to you. *That is who God is calling you to invite.* Pray for them, pray with them, share your heart gently and honestly. Serve them like Christ. Have compassion on them.