

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Matthew 16:1-4

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. But He replied to them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? An evil and adulterous generation eagerly seeks for a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah." And He left them and went away. (Matthew 16:1-4)

PHARISEES & SADDUCEES

Sinful man has opposed God since Cain complained about his punishment for murdering Abel. The opposition that Jesus faced during His earthly ministry primarily came from the Pharisees, a Jewish sect. He also faced opposition from the Sadducees, another Jewish sect. Now, apart from being Jews, they had almost nothing else in common.

The Pharisees were ritualistic; Sadducees were rationalistic.

The Pharisees accepted the full Old Testament; the Sadducees only accepted Genesis through Deuteronomy.

The Pharisees accepted oral tradition, and believed it was passed down from Moses; the Sadducees rejected oral tradition.

The Pharisees believed in immortality, the afterlife, heaven, hell, the intermediate state, angels, the resurrection, and the Messianic kingdom; the Sadducees were at

best agnostic about these or rejected them entirely.

The Pharisees taught predestination and God's autonomy; the Sadducees taught the complete freedom of the human will, an idea they picked up from Greek philosophers.

The Pharisees had a high value of God's rule and so they rejected secular rulers; the Sadducees happily cooperated with secular rulers.

The Pharisees were missionary-minded and were known for trying to convert people to their views. (By the way, this changed very quickly after the birth of the church.) The Sadducees on the other hand didn't care about converting anyone to their view.

Finally, the Pharisees focused primarily on the synagogue, which became the center of Jewish religious life in the first century; the Sadducees focused solely on the Temple.

TRANSITION: Yet in spite of all these major differences, the Pharisees and Sadducees were able to agree on one point at least: they hated Jesus of Nazareth.

THE REQUEST

Matthew 16:1

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. (Matthew 16:1)

These men clearly had no good motivation. They wanted to put Jesus to the test.

That is, they wanted Him to say or do something that they could use against Him.

The English word “test” covers a lot of territory. It isn’t necessarily good or bad. The original language, though, is very clear. These men were trying to tempt Jesus into some sinful action. Barring that, they wanted to catch Him in a mistake, to uncover His faults and limitations. They thought, “All we have to do is paint Jesus into an inescapable corner, and we can destroy Him.” They used subtlety and trickery to do it. They approached with fake respect. There is nothing sincere about them.

They had no idea of who Jesus was, of course. John 2:24-25 is an important passage to know:

But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for **He knew all men**, and because He had no need that anyone bear witness concerning man, for **He Himself knew what was in man**. (John 2:24-26)

Jesus is God in human flesh. He knew and still knows everything about every person. Jesus could not be fooled, tricked, deceived, or misled. He knew when a person was sincere and when they were devious and manipulative. He knew these men had evil intentions before they even reached Him, and He wasn’t taken in by their trickery.

TRANSITION: This would be a good time to take a few minutes and talk about the fact that God does test us to prove the genuineness of our faith, but He doesn’t tempt us to sin.

GOD DOES TEST

James 1:2-4 says,

Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that **the testing of your faith** brings about perseverance. And let perseverance have its perfect work, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

The word used here indicates testing meant proving the genuineness of something. God proved the reality of Abraham's faith by commanding him to offer up Isaac. Jesus tested the faith of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 to show that it was real.

God already knows whether our faith is genuine or fake. Genuine faith grows stronger with use and encourages perseverance in future trials, and ultimately leads to full Christ-likeness: perfection and completeness. That, James says, is ample reason to rejoice even in hard times.

GOD DOES NOT TEMPT

A few verses later James writes,

Let no one say when he is **tempted**, "I am being **tempted** by God"; for **God cannot be tempted by evil**, and **He Himself does not tempt anyone**. But each one is **tempted** when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully matured, it brings forth death. (James 1:13-15)

This is a different word; in fact, it's the word used in Matthew 16:1.

Anyone who says God is tempting him or her to sin is lying. The Lord doesn't do that.

The truth is that we don't need anyone to tempt us. We carry our own tempter around with us all the time. Our own desires and cravings (not necessarily sexual desires) are fully capable of carrying us away and enticing us.

Adam and Eve needed a tempter; they were created with a holy nature. Likewise, the Lord Jesus needed a tempter. Satan was successful with Adam and Eve, which is why we are the way we are today. Satan failed with Jesus, which is why we have hope for a better future.

TRANSITION: So, God does test us, but He does not tempt us. There's one more thing to consider before we go back to Matthew.

GOD GIVES OVER

We need to understand that while God does not tempt anyone to sin, He does bring intermediate judgment upon the wicked by giving them over to their sin, meaning that He stops restraining them.

Romans 1 says that mankind refused to worship God as God, and replaced Him with other things. As a result, God lifts His restraining hand and gives people over to their sinful natures.

We see this statement three times in Romans 1.

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the likeness of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. **Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity**, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. (Romans 1:23-24)

The proper worship of God is not just the right thing to do; it's also the smart thing to do. Those who refuse God His rightful worship lose any hope of Him protecting them from themselves. Many are given over to dishonoring impurity.

For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason **God gave them over to dishonorable passions**; for their females exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the males abandoned the natural function of the female and burned in their desire toward one another, males with males committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. (Romans 1:25-27)

Again, we see mankind denying God His rightful worship, and God justly giving them over, now to homosexuality. The Creator lifted His protective hand, and let human sin go even further astray.

Finally,

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God, **God gave them over to an unfit mind**, to do those things which are not proper, having been filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, violent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; (Romans 1:28-31)

The Creator has the right to His creatures' worship. When people deny Him His rightful worship He is right to judge them for their sin. Part of His judgment is letting their own natures rule them. He lifts His restraining hand and leaves them vulnerable

to sin and the death that results. People hate the idea that the Lord would stop them from doing something they wanted, but it's actually best for us when He does.

But giving over does not mean tempting. He simply lets people do what their natures want to do. Because man is sinful by nature, what we naturally want to do is to rebel against Him.

TRANSITION: Let's look back to Matthew 16, where Jesus tells His enemies that they have no idea what God is doing, and that isn't God's fault.

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Matthew 16:2-3

But He replied to them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? (Matthew 16:2-3)

The weather was obvious to them, as it is to us. A lot of people know the saying "red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky at morning, sailor take warning."

Jesus isn't talking about forecasting the weather a week in advance; that remains a challenge. But anyone who works out of doors all their life can give you a pretty good idea of what will happen in the next few hours.

But the Pharisees and the Sadducees could not read the signs of the times; that is, the signs of God's work in the world. They had received the very oracles of God and His written Word and yet were ignorant of it. They missed the signs Jesus performed.

Jesus healed the blind, dead, and crippled; He raised the dead; He preached the Gospel to those in need. All these were fulfillments of prophecy. Sometimes Jesus performed thousands of miracles in a single day. When He fed the 5,000 in Matthew 14, and the 4,000 in Matthew 15, He spent time healing all who were sick of various conditions. Every single healing was itself a sign fulfilling the Word of God, and Jesus performed thousands of them during His earthly ministry.

But the Pharisees and Sadducees ignored those signs and then decided they deserved some special sign, some special proof of Jesus' identity.

They ignored Jesus' Word, and they ignored Jesus' works.

They ignored Jesus' words, and they ignored Jesus' works. What does that make them? According to Jesus Himself, an evil, adulterous generation.

Why were they evil? Because they were dead in sin, and everything they did was an expression of sin.

Jesus said to them on another occasion,

Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins. For unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins. (John 8:24)

There is only one way to be delivered from evil, and that is through Jesus Christ.

Why were they adulterous? In the Bible adultery is a synonym for idolatry. A married person who has sex with anyone but their spouse commits sexual adultery.

A human being who worships any god but the One True God commits spiritual adultery.

The fact that they were Jews didn't mean anything. The fact that they were religious didn't mean anything. The fact that they were leaders didn't mean anything. They were evil and adulterous, and the evidence is that they reject the words and works of Jesus Christ, and demand that He dance to their tune.

TRANSITION: But Jesus won't play their game, and instead tells them that the evil and adulterous only receive one sign.

THE SIGN OF JONAH

Matthew 16:4

An evil and adulterous generation eagerly seeks for a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah." And He left them and went away. (Matthew 16:4)

What is the sign of Jonah? Jesus explained in Matthew 12:40:

"for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."
(Matthew 12:40)

The sign of Jonah points to Jesus' burial. The three days certainly began with His crucifixion. It certainly ended with His resurrection. But the focus is not on the cross or the empty tomb but on the grave.

Why is this the sign given to them?

Because Jesus' grave was to them the sign of His utter defeat.

Matthew writes that while Jesus hung on the cross,

... those passing by were blaspheming Him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who are going to destroy the sanctuary and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" (Matthew 27:39-43)

These cruel, wicked men held a victory lap while Jesus suffered and died. They danced with joy before His cross. They were beside themselves with joy over His suffering. Like those who conspired against Joseph, Daniel, Jeremiah, and others, they were convinced they had won.

The next morning they went to Pilate and asked for a guard to be placed at the tomb to keep Jesus' disciples from stealing His body and pretending that He had risen from the dead. Obviously, He was NOT going to rise from the dead; that doesn't happen!

The sign of Jonah for these men is a tiny little moment of time when they seem to have won, but which actually ended with the vindication of Jesus Christ in His resurrection.

They wanted a sign. The only sign they would receive is the sign that Jesus was exactly who He claimed to be, and they had made an eternal mistake.

BRINGING IT HOME

To be a Christian is to accept and trust in Jesus Christ, and that means accepting both His words and His works.

There are many who call themselves Christians who reject Jesus' Word. I heard one so-called "pastor" say that not all of the Bible is trustworthy because the Bible teaches slavery and debases women. That's a lie, of course; the Bible does neither. But he uses those lies to promote his own traditions at the expense of God's Word.

There are also many who call themselves Christians who reject Jesus' works. Some deny the virgin birth or the miracles He performed. That's bad enough, but others deny that Jesus died in the place of sinners, or that He physically rose from the dead. That rises to the level of blasphemy.

The world is full of people who assume they have the authority to approve or disapprove of what Jesus Christ said and did and believe that IF there is a judgment, they will be judged on what THEY decided was true and false, and not what God has clearly said in His Word.

Beloved, our hope is in the truth of the Word of God. The Scriptures are inerrant, infallible, and sufficient. There is no other revelation. And our hope is in the atoning work of Jesus Christ: His sinless life, His substitutionary death, and His glorious resurrection. There is no other power that can save us. These are the signs which build our faith and strengthen our hope.