

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL REPETITION (Matthew 15:39-16:4)

9.26.21

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of signs, meaning signals of commemorations or events that are on their way. For instance, when we notice the leaves in our trees changing color, we know that school is ready to start — along with football, longer nights, and cooler weather. When we see a certain kind of sign start popping up on lawns and billboards, we know that elections are on their way. When we see a certain kind of lighting on houses, we know that Christmas is on its way. Now sometimes a sign is another way of talking about evaluations; sports coaches play rookies in preseason games, looking for “signs” that they are ready to compete at the next level.

Wanna know what season is on its way? Just wander through a retail store, particularly men’s or women’s clothing. I used to work in the computer department of a law firm in downtown Minneapolis. To get to work, we had to walk through the second floor of this major retailer — which happened to be where you could find men’s and women’s clothing. Of course, we’d all be walking through the store well before they opened their doors, so naturally everything was all locked down, but you could see through the clear security walls all the mannequins dressed in their seasonally appropriate attire. Now I started working for this law firm in the spring of the year, so the mannequins had already been showing off their finest summer attire, but very quickly they began to display the latest fall looks. And then those things were being very quickly replaced by heavier, late-fall garments, and then by even heavier garments that indicated that winter was knocking at the door. And, as winter had at least some peripheral connection with Christmas (can’t get too holiday specific, you know, or you might offend some paying customer), pretty soon packages with ribbon and Christmas tree decorations were hanging from the walls and ceilings. That was the last sight I saw as I walked through that area after work on Christmas Eve, as I headed home to enjoy Christmas with my family.

But what a shock when I walked through that same area the day after Christmas. Overcoats? None. Gloves and scarves? Gone. Holiday decorations? What holiday decorations? Instead, I saw this! Now I know that every year seems to go by faster than the previous one, but that was ridiculous! And the only “sign” I saw from all of this was somebody in management making certain that not one penny of possible profit escaped that store’s reach.

Today we’re looking at another moment when the Jewish religious leaders try to trip up Jesus, but they attempt to do it in a very insulting way — and that also has to do with a “sign.” But before we get into this moment, **let’s begin with a word of prayer!**

TEXT (Matthew 15:39-16:4)

After Jesus had sent the crowd away, He got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan — Matthew 15:39.

This verse confirms the location of last week’s story — the feeding of the 4,000 — taking place on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, in a Gentile area called the Decapolis. By crossing over the lake to the other side, Jesus wound up back in Galilee, and therefore in a far more

Jewish-centric culture — and also within easier reach of the Jewish religious leaders, who certainly wasted no time in making their presence known.

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

Some things to notice: First, they came to Him. They were the ones on the attack against Jesus. They were desperate to discredit Him and take away some of the impact of Him and His ministry. And the reason was obvious: They were losing. They'd had no answers for His answers. When He had challenged them with His words, they had been silenced. When He had challenged them with His works, His miracles, they'd had no arguments that had effectively repackaged those moments to somehow minimize His power. For all the things He had said, and for all the things He had done, they had found no strategy that had countered His impact. But none of this has lessened their growing desire to somehow, in some way, take Him down. So, they kept coming after Him.

And, in a picture of their growing distress at their continuing inability to somehow derail His ministry, they had even partnered up with the Sadducees. Now this would have been a “marriage,” if you will, made a few feet lower than heaven. To put this partnership in contemporary terms, while the Pharisees were the staunch conservatives of their day, the Sadducees were considered the progressive liberals. And we know how often those two groups have partnered in our day. The last time that happened might have been in the aftermath of 9/11. In ordinary times, those two groups would have been in unquestioned, unyielding opposition to each other. But these were far from ordinary times. And, in this case, they had found a common enemy. Since they both felt threatened, they both needed Him gone. So, when it came to Jesus, their hatred of Him was far more important than their differences with each other; you know: “I’ll hate you later; I promise.” So, these two groups decided to set aside their differences and focus their energies and resources on this radical rabbi.

Now, in this instance, Matthew wrote that the Pharisees and Sadducees “tested” Jesus. How? They wanted Him to prove Himself by showing, for their benefit and for their evaluation and even for their seal of approval, a sign from heaven. Now understand — they were asking Jesus for some type of cosmic display by which they could recognize Him for who He truly was. This wasn’t asking Him something to further their own knowledge. Christ’s closest followers were doing that all the time. I know a few months ago one of our youth asked me a question about Augustine. It was a great question. But they were not asking me to see if they could fool me, or somehow trip me up, or make me look like an idiot. They were asking because they wanted to know something they didn’t; they wanted to have an understanding about something Augustine had said that was mentioned in one of my messages.

Not so in this instance. These guys wanted Jesus to fail, so they asked for a “sign from heaven,” hoping that this would somehow discombobulate Him in such a way that He would fail to live up to their expectations so that they could point at Him and tell everybody: “We told you so. We told you this Jesus was just a fake, a pretender. He couldn’t even give us a syllable, let alone a sign. Now what kind of ‘messiah’ is that?”

The problem with that approach is that Jesus' miracles were responses to the faith that people were placing in Him. But these guys had no faith but only deliberate, willful unbelief. There were no miracles that were going to be happening that would support that kind of heart. So, if it was their hope, their expectation, that Jesus was going to choke on their request, they were about to be disappointed — again!

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.’

Predicting the weather is actually a rather ancient practice. Around 650 BC (about 45 years before Nebuchadnezzar's first attack on Judea and Jerusalem to which the prophet Daniel was a part), the Babylonians were attempting short-term forecasts based on their observations of the clouds. Some 300 years later, the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote a treatise on the weather based on his own observations. Some were remarkably accurate; others were remarkably wrong — although it wasn't until the 1700s that most of his errors were recognized. The point being, Jesus' comments to the Pharisees and Sadducees concerning their own observations of the skies certainly would have reflected the practices and understandings of the time. But then comes Christ's own response to their tactic:

“You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 16:3b.

The Greek actually adds a phrase that does not appear in the NIV: “You hypocrites!” In other words, Christ is showing some genuine anger with them: “You religious play actors, you role-playing fools!” And then He gets to the heart of the matter: “You all are very good at figuring out what's going on in the sky.” In fact, the Greek tells us that Jesus credits them with great ability to discern the weather. But when it comes to seeing the signs of the times? They are blindfolded — from the inside! Spiritually, they can't see a thing. Another way He might put it: “You guys are great at seeing what's right in front of you, but you're totally missing what's right in front of you.” In other words: “You guys are really good at what the clues in the clouds means, but you all don't have a clue what I mean. You're very good at observing God's creation, but you won't take a moment to observe God's Son!”

Then, as we close this story, we'll borrow from what Mark wrote about this same moment. Upon His hearing this request from the Pharisees and Sadducees: ***[Jesus] sighed deeply and said, “Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it” — Mark 8:12.***

The fact that he “sighed deeply” tells us that their challenge to Him made a very deep impact on Him, right down to His soul. It obviously reflects frustration at their continued, ongoing, stiff-necked opposition to Him. How could they have missed what He had been doing, things that had been going on all around them, things which many of them had themselves witnessed? Jesus' words to John the Baptist's disciples are appropriate here as well: ***“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 11:4-5.*** This wasn't a lack of evidence that kept the Pharisees and Sadducees from believing. This was the lack of humility that results from a heart too hardened to break.

But it also simultaneously reflects His continued, ongoing, total love for them. He came to offer salvation just as much for His enemies as for anybody who followed Him. It reflects that His desire for their salvation was never dampened by their obstinate opposition to Him. And He felt an incredibly deep pain for them as they continued to fight Him, thus blocking the very salvation He came to provide.

And then His response echoes some of that frustration, asking why it was that this generation, in other words, these people, in this time, in this place, with the greatest resource of all — God’s Messiah — standing right in front of them, still felt the need for a sign, some kind of cosmic ID from the heavens that would confirm for them that this Nazarene was everything He said He was, as if God somehow needed their approval of His messenger. And why does Jesus say that no sign will be given? He is meaning there will be nothing given to supplement what God has already given them — standing right in front of them, declaring God’s words, displaying God’s works, and what He Himself will be providing in His death and resurrection — a sign that will dispel all doubt.

And then we’ll let Matthew finish us off: ***“A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.” Jesus then left them and went away — Matthew 16:4.***

Christ obviously had very little sympathy for that generation as it was. When He referred to that generation as “wicked,” He meant the kind of evil and wickedness that does harm, that asserts its evil on those around it. An “adulterous” generation was unfortunately familiar verbiage which likened Israel then, as so often in its past, to an unfaithful wife. So, it was a wickedly unfaithful generation who felt the need to pursue some sort of sign for validation that it should change its current lifestyle. And by essentially placing their belief in and worshiping a “god” who didn’t exist, they totally missed the meaning of the one true God’s Son when He did come. What other sign would they need? But no sign will be added to the sign that had already been prepared and would be given in its time— the “sign of Jonah.”

Now if that sounds familiar, it’s because this conversation was a rather specific and intense repetition of a conversation we covered in a message back in April when we talked about a similar confrontation that had occurred in Matthew 12. Jesus had been challenged by the Pharisees and teachers of the law to present a “sign” from Himself to verify all of what He had been preaching, teaching and demonstrating. Just as He did here, He refused, telling them that there was already a sign heading their way— the sign of Jonah.

And what was that “sign of Jonah?” Well, if you remember, Jonah had been swallowed by a great fish and held captive in the belly of that fish for three days — meaning parts of three days and three nights. Likewise, Jesus would be “swallowed” by the earth and held captive in a tomb for parts of three days and three nights before being gloriously resurrected, much as Jonah, who must have seemed to be dead and gone, was miraculously returned to the living after being spit up on the shore. That would be the ultimate sign of who Jesus was — a certifiable death followed by a resurrection from that death, fulfilling precisely what He Himself had been declaring throughout His ministry would happen. That’s God-proof stuff. And guys, Jesus might have said before leaving them and that conversation, there’s your sign.

APPLICATION

There are a couple of great application pieces to take away from this moment in Christ's ministry, and they are as follows:

First, we saw how, in asking for a "sign from heaven" that confirmed who Jesus was, the Pharisees and Sadducees totally, completely and without exception overlooked all the signs that Jesus had been showing since His ministry began:

- 1) His words came from the Father; as He Himself said: ***"I did not speak on My own, but the Father who sent Me commanded Me to say all that I have spoken. I know that His command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told Me to say"*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 12:49-50.***
- 2) His works came from the Father; as He Himself said: ***"Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. . . . Do not believe Me unless I do the works of My Father. But if I do them, even though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father"*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 5:19, 10:37-38.***

The point? The "sign from heaven" was there — right there in the person of Jesus Christ. His enemies chose not to believe; they chose not to receive what the clear evidence that was being presented to them. BOTTOM LINE: They missed what God was declaring through His Son — all its power, all its truth. In other words: DISCONNECT.

So how does "disconnect" play out today? In one of the most consistent themes to which pastors and teachers have addressed themselves through all of the 40 years in which I have been in church ministry, and sadly even much longer than that, and that is: biblical illiteracy. So many people attend "bible-believing" churches and consider themselves "bible-believing Christians" — but they don't have the first idea what the Bible actually says about many of the issues we face in our culture today, nor can they think of the first thing to say when questioned or challenged about what they do believe. As a result, they miss a lot of opportunities to present and display the words and works of Christ, and the love and desires of God — simply because they do not know what His word says. And as a further result, the Bible is misrepresented, making it appear to say things that it never said. If we want the Scriptures to have the impact on this world that we think it should, we should be willing to learn what those Scriptures have to offer — what they are, and when to find them.

Second, Christ's love for His enemies. He Himself said during the Sermon on the Mount: ***"I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven"*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:44-45a.*** That was His drill, and it is seen so clearly here in this picture — which also contains a profound truth for us all to consider. Folks, we simply can't fulfill the command of Jesus to "go to all, preach to every" if we are viewing people in terms of "enemies." Instead, we claim to be "gospel-centric," meaning that our ministry, our only filter in viewing the world, is found in these two verses: ***[All] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*** — ***Paul, Romans 3:23,*** and ***Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*** — ***Paul, I Timothy 1:15b.*** The biblical truth of those two verses is what is meant to spur us on to obeying Christ's words found in the last chapter of the gospel of Mark: ***"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation"*** —

Jesus Christ, Mark 16:15. We go because of command, and we go because of need — realizing that somebody else obeyed and went to minister to our need for salvation through Christ.

Now this is not about people we might consider enemies, either by way of politics or philosophies or lifestyles or any of that. When Jesus says to “love our enemies,” He is referring to those who are enemies of the church, enemies of biblical Christianity. So, for Christ, while the religious leaders might have considered Jesus their enemy, He did not consider them to be His. He had no enemies. On the contrary, He loved His enemies, even to the point of saying on the cross, in the middle of His horrific suffering: “Father, forgive them; they don’t know, they don’t even understand, what they are doing.” If that doesn’t describe what our attitudes toward nonbelievers should be, I’m not sure what would say it better. Sinners sin: it’s all they know. That doesn’t make them our enemies. That makes them our mission field. How often do we respond in prayer for those who oppose biblical principles? How often do we respond in prayer for those who oppose the church, the work of the gospel? That’s who Jesus prayed for. How can we do anything different?

CONCLUSION

Everybody remember Ringo Starr? That’s right; he was the drummer for Rory Storm and the Hurricanes. But then, in 1962, he settled in to become the drummer for another British group — the Beatles. That would be a pretty good career move for him. Now although the Beatles broke up as a group in 1970, all of the individuals went on to have strong solo careers as well — including Ringo, who just released a new song this summer entitled, “Let’s Change The World.” Incidentally, Ringo turned 81 about a month before the song’s release.

But ever since I first heard it, I’ve been intrigued by that song title: “Let’s Change The World.” You see, that’s what Jesus came to do — to paraphrase Paul’s words, to make “all things new.” Do we believe that’s possible?

Yeah; it’s a big world — just under 7.9 billion at last count. But it’s about being faithful to the moment, and faithful to the message. You see, if we are truly conquerors by means of Jesus, if we minister by means of Jesus, if we obey by means of Jesus, if we are empowered by means of Jesus, if we love by means of Jesus, then we simply focus on the moments He brings us — through the filter of all that equipping through Jesus. And we do that best when we are knowing His word, and when we are reflecting His love.

Is that what we’re about? Does every part of the world matter to us? Does it bother us where our world is at? Does it drive us to our knees? That’s where we need to be. Let’s pray!