

Signs

Matthew 16:1-4

In Matthew chapter 16 we will take a short journey in search of truth. We will find here a simple declaration of two great truths; I dare say that these two truths are the most important answers to the most important questions you will face in your entire life.

Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the truth.

Secondly, there the truth of the cross. Jesus accomplishes his mission of making the truth known through way of the cross, and followers of the truth live the path of the cross.

How is this known? It is revealed by God. Truth about God is known because God reveals it.

On our journey to get there we will take two quick stops. Today we will look at the topic of signs. Next week the place of experience. In the third week we will look at the revelation of truth through Christ. And finally, we will look at the principle of the cross.

The foundation of knowing God is revelation; signs and experience are to play support roles in our knowledge of God.

I. Signs are no Substitute for Faith

Pharisees and Sadducees

They were common enemies, but they united to resist Jesus. (Nancy Pelosi and Newt Gingrich came asking...)

They were blind

You of course want to ask, just what kind of sign do you want? People are being healed instantly, demons are cast out, masses are fed miraculously, Jesus walks on water, and you ask for a sign.

A sign from heaven

In Matthew the Kingdom of God is Kingdom of Heaven, as we have noted earlier that Matthew will avoid using the name of God when possible in deference to a largely Jewish readership. A sign from heaven is a sign from God; it is some kind of cosmic sign that is done just for the sake of doing something supernatural.

II. Some Sign Seeking is Sinful

Now please be careful here: Not all sign seeking is sinful; and signs are not in and of themselves evil, but some sign seeking is sinful. What was sinful:

A. They came to test Him (v. 1)

They were surrounded by ample signs of who Jesus was, but they refused to believe. Instead, they called on Jesus to prove it and in doing so they tested Jesus, or tried to.

1. How do we test God?

- i. I will do this and get forgiveness – we are testing God. He has told us it is wrong, that it leads to death, that it dishonors him, but we intentionally disobey him. In essence, we are saying to God: prove to me that your word is true, that this is wrong, or that you forgive.
- ii. The car salesperson says to you, ‘buy the car, doesn’t your God provide.’ ‘Where is your faith?’
- iii. God speak to me just once and I will believe. We are asking God to give us a substitute for faith – prove to me God that you are there.

B. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign (v. 4)

Now that seems to be quite a harsh description of this group of religious leaders.

1. What is adulterous about the generation?

D.A. Carson on the Leaven to avoid which we read in the next verses (11)

The “teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” to which Jesus refers therefore, is an attitude of unbelief toward divine revelation that could not perceive Jesus to be the Messiah but that tried to control and tame the Messiah they claimed to await. The disciples are told to avoid that.

- i. So adultery is not submitting to God, not loving God, but trying to “tame” and “control” God to get something else.
- ii. In this situation we should suppose ourselves to be the wife. God is the faithful and loving husband. We go to the husband and ask for jewels to adorn ourselves with for another lover. We seek from God not because we love God, but we love others and we try to control God to give us other lovers.

2. Why does he use the word “generation” to describe them?

Jesus does not identify just a few individuals as adulterous and evil, but an entire generation. This is not the first time in scripture where God identifies an entire generation as something. We saw it in the Israelites who, like the generation in Jesus’ day, responded to God with unbelief. In fact, it is frequent.

- i. It tells us that sin has a group dynamic. It is indeed like leaven and it permeates and spreads.
- ii. Riverside, as a church, has a culture. It is important what church you plant yourself in. Not all are the same. What is the culture of the church? Is it pretentious? Is it real? Is it believing? Is it adulterous?
- iii. Your network of support and close friends has a culture. Some come to Christ and they return to their friends from before and love them and witness to them and demonstrate the courage to show them the difference that Christ has made in them. Others return to those old friends and try still to fit in, but miss the fact that their old culture is one of unbelief that is bringing death to their spiritual walk.

III. Healthy Christians Know How to Interpret Signs

It is important to realize that in and of themselves signs are not evil. It is all about our attitude in what we are desiring from signs.

A. Jesus condemns their ignorance – he condemns them for not being able to interpret the signs of the times

God is all around us. He is at work and he is always at work. But without faith we will fail to see him at work.

B. Jesus contrasts their ignorance with their knowledge – they know all about the weather, but nothing about him

They are knowledgeable about the weather, but ignorant concerning the things of God.

D.A. Hagner comments:

It is surprising that in a wide variety of different fields of knowledge human beings can be so knowledgeable and perceptive, yet in the realm of the knowledge of God exist in such darkness. The explanation of the latter sad state is not to be found in a lack of intellectual ability—no more for the Pharisees and Sadducees than for today. The evidence is there, examinable and understandable for those who are open to it and who welcome it. The issue in the knowledge of God is not intellect but receptivity. The “signs of the times,” ... are there to be received and affirmed by faith

Illustration from Acts 12

Read 12:1-5

This has happened before – read 5:17-21

4 squads of soldiers = 4 x 4 or 16.

What follows is the amazing account of Peter's deliverance from prison.

The important question is: What gets your attention? Is it James killed or Peter released?

- i. Whichever one gets your attention determines how you interpret the other.** If Peter's release gets your attention than you properly understand that James' death was ordained by God, that James had the privilege of martyrdom, and that the church goes forward by and through courageous and joyful suffering. But, if James death is all you see, then you will find a way to dismiss the reality of Peter's deliverance. You see either God working and in control and you see the good which he does in all things, or you see the absence of God.
- ii. What doesn't get your attention you take for granted!** Peter is free! Yea, yea, that happened back in 5:17-21; that's old hat!
- iii. What you take for granted you expect!** You expect it and it ceases to amaze you.
- iv. And it is only a small step to begin to feel entitled to what you expect.**

So, what are you knowledgeable about? Are you unaware of God? Are you ignorant of God at work about you? Evidence that you are aware is that you are amazed constantly at the display of God. There is an absence of grumbling and complaining.

IV. Signs must be used properly

Signs are to direct you toward something, but not intended to be a substitute for that something.

The sign of Jonah is all Jesus offers to a generation seeking a sign

- i. This of course refers to Jonah
- ii. It points back to Jesus and to his death and his resurrection which validated his death
- iii. It is the gospel
- iv. Revealed to us now through the Bible

Sings of the times should point us to Jesus. Jesus and his gospel must be the foundation of one's faith. No sign can remove the need to walk by faith.

Therefore, signs are not intended to be the way in which Christians make everyday decisions. We are not looking for God to reveal through signs the decisions we are to make in him: where do I live? What house do I buy? Who do I marry? What do I major in? What career do I choose?

Indeed we pray about all these things and ask God to direct us, but we trust him to direct us as we pray, study his word and obey him.

The signs direct us not to what to do in the future, but to trust the one who controls the future, to love him and take up our cross daily and follow him.

You may ask, what about Gideon?

Gideon was largely a coward:

- i. In the wine press threshing wheat
- ii. Asked for a sign – the sacrifice was consumed by fire from the rock
- iii. First act – tear down your father's pagan altar – he did it at night
- iv. First battle – go down in the enemies camp (oh and take your servant with you if you are scared)

His manner of gathering courage is not intended to be a validation of sign seeking for guidance! I think the point is that God used a timid man to do great acts of courage.

How about Zechariah? He asked for a sign that his wife was going to give birth and God made it so he couldn't speak.

Recommended Resource: Just Do Something, by Kevin DeYoung

<http://www.wtsbooks.com/sitesearch/search.php?keywords=Just+Do+Something>

From Sam Storms (Quoting John Piper)

But what about Mt. 12:39 and Mt. 16:4? Doesn't Jesus denounce as wicked and adulterous those who "crave" and "seek" after signs (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22)? Yes, but note well whom he is addressing and why they are denounced. These are *unbelieving* scribes and Pharisees, not children of God. These who made such demands of Christ had no intention of following him. "Seeking signs from God is 'wicked and adulterous' when the demand for more and more evidence comes from a resistant heart and simply covers up an unwillingness to believe" (John Piper). Seeking signs as a pretext for criticizing Jesus or from a hankering to see the sensational is rightly rebuked. But that certainly wasn't the motivation of the early church, nor need it be ours. Perhaps an illustration will help. John Piper explains:

"If we are carrying on a love affair with the world, and our husband, Jesus, after a long separation comes to us and says, 'I love you and I want you back,' one of the best ways to protect our adulterous relationship with the world is to say, 'You're not really my husband; you don't really love me. Prove it. Give me some sign.' If that's the way we demand a sign, we are a wicked and adulterous generation. But if we come to God with a heart aching with longing for vindication of his glory and the salvation of sinners, then we are not wicked and adulterous. We are a faithful wife, only wanting to honor our husband."

Do you come to God insistent on a miracle, being prompted by an unbelieving heart that demands He put on a show before you will obey him? Or do you come humbly, in prayer, with a desire to glorify God in the display of his power and an equal desire to minister his mercy and compassion and love to those in need? The former, God condemns. The latter, he commends.

Other Passages on Signs

Luke 17:20 Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed,

Luke 23:8 When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him

John 2:11 This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

John 2:18 So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?"

John 2:23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name

- when they saw the signs that he was doing.
- John 3:2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."
- John 4:48 So Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."
- John 4:54 This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.
- John 6:2 And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick.
- John 6:14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"
- John 6:26 Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.
- John 6:30 So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?"
- John 7:31 Yet many of the people believed in him. They said, "When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?"
- John 9:16 Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them.
- John 10:41 And many came to him. And they said, "John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true."
- John 11:47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs.
- John 12:18 The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign.
- John 12:37 Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him,
- John 20:30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;
- Acts 2:22 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—
- Acts 2:43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.
- Acts 2:43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.
- Acts 4:16 saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.
- Acts 4:22 For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

- Acts 4:30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”
- Acts 5:12 Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico.
- Acts 6:8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.
- Acts 7:36 This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.
- Acts 8:6 And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.
- Acts 8:13 Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.
- Acts 14:3 So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.
- Acts 15:12 And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.
- Rom 4:11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well,
- Rom 15:19 by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ;
- 1 Cor 1:22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,
- 1 Cor 14:22 Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers.
- 2 Cor 12:12 The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.
- Phil 1:28 and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.
- 2 Thess 2:9 The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders,
- 2 Thess 3:17 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.
- Heb 2:4 while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.