

“Solus Christus”
Matthew 16:1-12
October 28, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

We have been looking at the four *solas* of the Protestant Reformation, and we come today to the final one: Christ alone. We have a contemporary hymn we sing that carries this title. “In Christ Alone” goes through the primary components of Jesus’ saving work—his life, death, resurrection and ascension. The hymn then ends with the difference these make in our lives. “No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me. From life’s first cry to final breath Jesus commands my destiny. No power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from His hand. Till He returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I’ll stand.” There is no joy greater than knowing and trusting Jesus, and no tragedy greater than missing Jesus.

A miss can be painful. When I was younger, I remember trying to help my little brother learn how to catch baseballs when they were hit high in the air. I would throw them up in the air and he would move under them and attempt to catch them. The whole project ended painfully when he completely missed a ball and it struck him right in the nose. Missing Jesus is far more tragic than missing a baseball. But sadly, it is the case that many do miss Jesus. Many regard him as the problem rather than the solution. Others just think of him as being irrelevant to life’s issues. Even those who believe in Christ can miss him when they fall into unbelief, as we are going to see in this story of the disciples who were so self-absorbed that they forgot who Jesus was and completely misunderstood what he was saying. Two stories in today’s passage speak of how Jesus can be missed, and consequently how we can guard against such a tragedy.

I. Evil Hearts Miss Jesus – v. 1-4

The Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jesus with a request that at first seems reasonable. They wanted Jesus to show them a sign from heaven that would authenticate his authority as coming from God. After all, Jesus was making some very bold claims. He claimed to be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, rising even to the level of being divine himself. He was telling people to forsake all to follow him. The request for a sign is still common. If Jesus is really who he says he is, why not show it with some clear sign from heaven? Why not write a message in the sky that says, “Jesus is God; trust him today”? In my Pastor’s Class, I mention the challenge issued by the well-known atheist Sam Harris. Pretending to be friendly to Christians, he offers to help us get our message across by suggesting that we should find a child who has lost a limb

due to some act of violence, like stepping on a buried mine in a war-ravaged community. Harris then suggests that we might have a worldwide prayer campaign asking God to regrow the lost limb on the child. He says we should televise the whole thing, and when God answers the united prayer of Christians all over the world, people will believe in Jesus.

How would Jesus answer Harris? An answer is provided in the story before us here. While this request for a sign from the Pharisees and Sadducees may at first seem to be friendly, it is clear from the text that it is not. Our first clue is provided by Matthew's report of this alliance between Pharisees and Sadducees. They were from politically opposite sides, the Pharisees being super-conservative and the Sadducees quite liberal. Like Republicans and Democrats today, they find it hard to work together on anything. But Jesus provides common ground for them, allowing them to unite in their opposition to him. It is something like, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," and Jesus was the enemy of both groups. Matthew also says that their request was an effort to "test" Jesus. They were trying to trap Jesus. They were convinced that if he tried to produce a sign, he would fail, and that if he refused to produce a sign, he would lose popular support.

Jesus responds to this in a way that could also address the challenge given by Sam Harris. He clarifies first that the problem is not the lack of signs, but the inability to interpret signs. He says directly, "**You cannot interpret the signs of the times**" (v. 3). They were illiterate when it came to being able to read the signs that had already been given to them; so why do they think more signs would suddenly clarify things? Just prior to this incident, Jesus had fed four thousand people with only seven loaves and a few fish by multiplying these things to the point that the leftovers were greater than what he started with. The book of signs was there for them to read, but they were illiterate when it came to such things. Further, Jesus makes it clear that their illiteracy was not due to a lack of intelligence. They were very clever in knowing how to read the weather signs in the skies, but unable to read the spiritual signs.

So if the problem wasn't the lack of evidence or of intelligence, what was it? Why did these leaders in Israel not believe in Jesus? Why do some very intelligent people in our day not believe in him? I read recently that Stephen Hawking, just before he died, made one last parting shot against God through his affirmation of atheism. He was clearly a very intelligent man, but not a believer in Jesus. Jesus tells us the reason in verse 4. "**An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign.**" Their hearts were evil and unfaithful. They wanted to do what they wanted to do and not submit themselves to God. They wanted to control God instead of coming under his control. In the battle between head and heart, heart wins every time.

The end of the story contains a surprise. Everything Jesus has said so far would lead you to think that he is going to refuse to give them a sign. But then

he says at the end that he will give them a sign, one he calls **“the sign of Jonah.”** What did he mean by that? Jonah was the reluctant prophet who went to Nineveh to preach a message a judgment. God took him there via a whale that had swallowed him. Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days, after which the whale vomited him out on dry land. The sign of Jonah was two-fold, involving something in the present and something in the future. The present sign was the preaching of Jesus in the midst of an evil and adulterous people, just as Jonah preached. Like Jonah, Jesus was sent from a far land, from heaven, to preach a message from God. But it also has a future reference, to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days and nights, Jesus too would be in the belly of the tomb before emerging victorious over the grave. It’s hard to imagine a more convincing sign. Jesus predicted his resurrection, after which it actually happened. And it wasn’t a private resurrection, but one in which he appeared to hundreds of witnesses. Many did in fact believe, but many others did not.

If your heart longs for a sign from God, look no further than the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is by means of that death and resurrection that he deals with our real problem, a problem that has nothing to do with lack of evidence or of intelligence. It is a problem that runs much deeper, all the way to evil hearts. Jesus alone can heal such hearts, and he does so through his death and resurrection. If that sign is not sufficient for you to believe, no sign would be.

II. Self-Absorbed Unbelief Misses Jesus – v. 5-12

After Jesus finished with the Pharisees and Sadducees, he and his disciples set sail for the other side of the sea. When they arrived, he warned them about the teaching of those Jewish leaders: **“Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees”** (v. 6). They didn’t understand what he meant and began discussing it among themselves. The consensus was that Jesus was rebuking them for forgetting to plan ahead and bring enough bread with them. It is true that disciples and not rabbis were expected to plan such mundane details. Even so, it’s hard to see how they concluded from Jesus’ warning that he was rebuking them for failure to bring bread. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees, they too were missing Jesus. They missed him by completely misunderstanding his meaning.

Jesus diagnoses their problem not by focusing on their seeming lack of good interpretive skills, but on their lack of faith. **“O you of little faith,”** he says. Their lack of faith led to a lack of ability to understand Jesus correctly. So Jesus addresses this not by teaching them about the science of interpretation but by calling them to remember who he is. **“Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many**

baskets you gathered? (v. 9-10). Jesus gives them a lesson in math stemming from the two feeding miracles. The lesson is that the less the disciples had and the bigger their need, the more Jesus did. So when they were facing the task of feeding five thousand, they started with five loaves of bread, while having more bread, seven loaves, when they were asked to feed the four thousand. Though having a bigger problem (more hungry people) and fewer resources in the form of less bread, they had more leftovers when the need was greater (twelve baskets versus seven). When you have Jesus with you, the critical issue isn't the size of the need but simply whether or not Jesus is present.

The disciples were not centered on Jesus, but were instead self-absorbed. Matthew says that they were discussing Jesus' warning "among themselves" (v. 7). In their self-focused thoughts, they were forgetting Jesus. When that happens, everything becomes about you and you will misunderstand Jesus and his word. The disciples here remind me of a little boy in our former neighborhood. A guest in our home once backed over our lamppost as they were leaving our house. When I was out repairing it the next day, this neighborhood boy who used to come over all the time came up to me and asked me what I was doing. When I told him that I was repairing this lamppost that was knocked over the night before, his immediate response was, "I didn't do it." When we lose sight of Jesus, we inevitably become self-absorbed. Everything becomes about us, for good or for bad. We think that it's always about our performance. So if something bad happens to our children, we think, "I must have done something wrong." Or conversely, when something good happens we are often quick to claim credit.

A self-absorbed attitude forgets Jesus. So Jesus seeks to correct it by turning their thoughts again to Jesus and what he can do. He is reminding them that the good news of the kingdom is about what we receive, not what we achieve. At its center, it is about looking to Jesus and trusting him. If you have Jesus by faith, you have everything. Nothing delivers from self-absorption like that.

Once upon a time, there was a farmer and his wife who were very poor. They sometimes went hungry when their garden didn't produce enough vegetables. One day, a visitor came to them and gave them a goose. That made them happy because the goose would regularly lay eggs that they could eat. Much to their delight, the first egg the goose laid was a golden egg. Not only that, but every egg laid by this goose was a golden egg. As long as they had this goose, they would never have to go hungry again. But one day, they grew impatient with only one golden egg at a time. They reasoned that if the goose laid golden eggs, there must be a rich storehouse of gold inside the goose. So they killed the goose, but found instead that it was just a normal goose on the inside. Whenever we forget who Jesus is, it is like killing the goose that lays the golden egg. As long as we have Jesus, we have everything. That's why when we sing, "All I have is Christ," we are singing a joyful song and not a lament.

One of the results of missing Jesus by our self-absorption is that we misinterpret his words. Jesus here gives them a warning about the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and they think he is rebuking them. It is still the same, with many people misinterpreting Jesus' warnings. One of the most common forms of this I see is when people interpret his warnings as threats. A warning is motivated by love. When a parent tells his child, look both ways before crossing the street or you may be struck by a car and killed, that is a warning. If a parent says, "Look both ways before crossing the street or I'll kill you," that's a threat. Jesus lovingly warns of danger, and that is what he is doing here. Have you misinterpreted Jesus' warnings because you have lost sight of who he is?

The way Jesus corrects their misunderstanding is significant. He never explains his real meaning. Rather, he reminds them who he is and then simply repeats the warning to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. And they understand. He is warning them about the dangers of their teaching, saying that it is like leaven. It spreads quietly and quickly. Once they take their focus off of themselves and return it to Jesus, they understand.

CONCLUSION:

An interesting question was posed in an article I read this week. "If you had the opportunity to write to your 18-year-old self, what would you say?" When I was 18, I was a brand new Christian. Though I was excited about knowing Jesus, I can see now (though I didn't see it at the time) that I was much too self-absorbed. I focused way too much attention on my performance in every arena: the classroom, athletics and relationships. I remember feeling envy toward those who seemed better in these arenas than I. I remember feeling fear and anxiety as well. So what I would say to my 18-year-old self is really what Paul prayed for the Ephesians: **"having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know... what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe"** (1:18-19). It's really what Jesus told the disciples. I needed, and still do need, to take my eyes off myself and see Jesus. I need to trust him and rest in him so that I can understand him and obey him.

Here's what that means for you. If you have missed Jesus through an evil heart or through self-absorption, there is healing for you in Christ. It happens just as it did for the disciples. Stop looking at your performance and look to Jesus' performance. Repent of trying to save yourself by what you do and look in faith to Jesus.