

☒ LIFE OF JESUS

July 11, 2021 | *The Demand for a Sign*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

-In what ways do your culture and friendship circles distract you from growing in your faith?

-Read Matthew 16:1–12.

-Pray that God would help you seek to understand Jesus rather than deny Him.

THIS WEEK

☒ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

We can only receive Jesus in faith, not disbelief.

☒ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Growing in your faith demands keeping Jesus at the center.

☒ MEDITATE

“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah” (Matthew 16:4).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to begin considering why some people receive Jesus while others refuse.

Q: *What does it take to understand the message of a book or a work of art?*

Q: *What keeps some people from understanding art, music, or writing?*

Avid art lovers will tell you that true art communicates in ways mere words cannot. Understanding art, however, is an art in itself. It first requires you to jettison your skepticism. If you think of the meaning of the objects depicted, you will never be willing to appreciate the intricacies of the piece that point to what the artist wished to say. Understanding art also requires looking at details and understanding them in light of the whole. You have to look long enough to see past the obvious, but you can never forget what is obvious.

Interpreting art provides a good illustration of why the Jewish leaders were not able to understand Jesus. Since their hearts were closed off to Jesus, they would never be able to understand Him or His ministry. They would miss signs as plain as the evening or morning sun.

Q: *How can you open your heart to the meaning of Jesus?*

Q: *What keeps you from understanding Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT – Life contains endless distractions that can keep you from understanding the importance of Jesus. With so many things vying for our attention, it is challenging to keep our focus on Christ. If we are going to understand Jesus, however, we must keep our relationship with Him at the center of our lives. If we allow ourselves to put Him aside for a more opportune time, that time will never come. Behavioral scientists say it takes doing a task twenty to thirty times before it becomes a habit. What do you need to focus on in order to get and keep Jesus at the center of your life? For the next month, focus on making one of those things a habit.

☐ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The Jewish leaders did not need a sign, because they refused to believe in Jesus. Because they were more concerned with worldly matters, the disciples were endangered by their teaching.

1. WHY NON-BELIEVERS FAIL TO UNDERSTAND JESUS

2. WHY BELIEVERS FAIL TO UNDERSTAND JESUS

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate Matthew 16:1–12 and reflect on our need to open our hearts to Jesus and His message.

1. WHY NON-BELIEVERS FAIL TO UNDERSTAND JESUS

■ MATTHEW 16:1–4

Q: *What two groups were aligned against Jesus on this occasion?*

Q: *Why was this an odd alliance against Jesus?*

Since all the Jewish authorities were opposed to Jesus, it can be easy for us to think of them as being the same. This was not the case, and the disagreements between the Pharisees and Sadducees occasionally even overshadowed their disagreements with Jesus and His followers (Acts 23:6–7). So, the original reader of Matthew’s Gospel may have been surprised by the alliance of these two opposing parties. This alliance shows how far those who oppose God are willing to go. It is reminiscent of Psalm 2:1–2, which states, “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed.” The rulers of this world will, despite their differences and mutual distaste for one another, align themselves against God and Jesus Christ. The alignment of the Pharisees and Sadducees is just one example of the larger cosmic conflict between God and His enemies.

Q: *How do you see this conflict playing out today?*

Q: *How can you prepare yourself for increasing hostility from the world?*

APPLICATION POINT – The cosmic conflict that appeared in Jesus’s time continues to appear today. Governments and massive corporations seek to coerce Christians into abandoning long held beliefs. As our culture continues to modernize, it will only increase the pressure to conform to its morality rather than God’s. If we are going to remain faithful, we must know our beliefs now and resolve to hold to them no matter the cost.

Q: *How did the Pharisees and Sadducees test Jesus?*

Q: *Did the Jewish leaders believe Jesus could produce signs on demand?*

The Jewish leaders requested a sign from Jesus to authenticate His message. When God told Moses to lead the Israelites, Moses questioned whether the Israelites would believe him. In response, God gave Moses two signs, two unnatural occurrences produced on demand, to show the Israelites (Exodus 4:1–9). This is related to what the Jewish authorities were asking. It is difficult to judge what the Jewish leaders were anticipating, but it seems they were hopeful that Jesus would fail to produce the sign and thus be exposed as a fraud or hoped to match whatever sign He produced in a manner similar to Pharaoh’s magicians. Jesus, however, treated this as an authentic request and chastised the Jewish leaders for requesting a sign. The basis of His rebuke was that the signs of His ministry should have been evident to all who were watching. He called them a wicked generation and refused them.

Q: *What are the dangers of looking for signs today?*

Q: *What was the greatest sign Jesus gave to us of the authenticity of His ministry?*

APPLICATION POINT – Human beings are naturally given to sensationalism. This is partly why we are held in awe by the most tragic headlines appearing on the news. It is why simple occurrences in the nighttime sky conjure visions of alien life forms and why we flock to movies that routinely suspend the laws of physics and reality. We

yearn to see something out of the ordinary. Jesus warned us against allowing this urge to spill over into our spiritual life. There will always be imposter religions, and if we are caught up in sensationalism, we will inevitably be led astray. Even sensationalism outside of our religious and spiritual context can lead us away from true belief. Aside from the sign of Jonah, God has given us something far greater than a sign to validate or invalidate religious teaching. He has given us His inspired Word. If you are driven by sensationalism in determining what you believe, exchange that sensationalism for testing all things by the truth of God's Word. Testing every teaching may not have the same thrill factor, but it will keep you closer to God's vision for your life.

❓: *Why did Jesus refuse to give a sign to the Jewish leaders?*

❓: *Why did Jesus discuss Palestinian weather patterns with the Jewish elite?*

Jesus may, at first, appear to be evasive in His response to the Jewish leaders, but that is not the case. Rather than comply with their request for a sign, Jesus confronted them with their unbelief. The signs that validated His message were plain for all to see. The Jewish leaders simply refused to make the same deductions they would make when interpreting the weather. The Jewish leaders did not lack necessary evidence. They just refused to believe. Any sign Jesus produced would only have been met by denial. Nothing can be done, even by Jesus, for those who refuse to believe.

❓: *Would signs or miracles make you follow your Christian convictions more thoroughly?*

❓: *Why is it hard to consistently follow Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT – The Jewish leaders' request may resonate with many people, even professing Christians. We can think, "If only I saw a miracle, then I would know Christianity is real, and I would live out my beliefs more consistently." This is a dangerous place for a Christian to be for two reasons. First, we fail to live what we believe. This is even worse than the Jewish leaders. At least their refusal to follow Jesus matched their refusal to believe. Refusing to act consistently with our convictions shows a callousness to God that exceeds even that

of unbelievers. Second, we fail to see the signs of God's providence all around us. Just as Jesus told the Jewish leaders, signs of God's work are all around us. We have become so intertwined with the secular world we simply cannot see them. We do not need miracles. We need to repent and pray that God would open our eyes to how He works in the world.

Q: *What sign did Jesus offer the Jewish leaders?*

Q: *Who was Jonah?*

Jesus did offer the Jewish leaders a sign, but not the kind they had in mind. Jonah was an Old Testament prophet who disobeyed God's command. God told him to go to Nineveh and announce His pending judgment on the city. But Jonah refused and fled to the sea. After being tossed overboard in a frantic attempt to abate the terrible storm God sent, Jonah was swallowed by a great fish appointed by God. His life was preserved, but Jonah was in the fish for three days and three nights. Jesus said this would be similar to His death and resurrection. He would die and be raised to life three days later. So, His resurrection can be thought of as the sign of Jonah. The Jewish leaders would not have understood Jesus's remark at this point, but soon, Jesus would rise from the dead so that all the world might hear of Him and believe.

Q: *What are the evidences for Jesus's resurrection?*

Q: *How does the resurrection verify everything about Jesus and His gospel?*

APPLICATION POINT – The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the central event in all of human history. Jesus's resurrection changes everything, even the most entrenched assumptions of the human heart. It is so vital to the Christian faith that Paul says without it, we are stuck in our sins and our faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:14, 19). If you struggle with knowing your faith is real, examine the resurrection of Jesus.

In 1998, Lee Strobel published his investigation into the resurrection of Jesus under the title *The Case for Christ*. Strobel was an atheist when he began researching this book, intending to discredit the resurrection. As

he investigated, however, he became overwhelmed by the evidence and confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior. You could start your examination of the resurrection by considering his experiences as he recounts them in *The Case for Christ*, but there are hundreds of other resources available as well that can help affirm the truth of the resurrection.

2. WHY BELIEVERS FAIL TO UNDERSTAND JESUS

■ MATTHEW 16:5-12

Q: *What prompted Jesus's warning to beware of the Jewish leaders?*

Q: *What example did Jesus use when He explained the metaphorical meaning of bread?*

After His confrontation with the Jewish leaders over signs, Jesus warned His disciples to beware of their teaching, but the disciples completely misunderstood His warning because they were more concerned with physical things than with spiritual ones. Jesus told them to beware of the “leaven” of the Pharisees, meaning their teaching, but the disciples thought He was referring to real bread because they had forgotten the bread for their journey.

Q: *How can Jesus's mode of teaching help us disciple others and share our faith?*

Q: *Why do we struggle to prioritize spiritual matters in our lives?*

APPLICATION – The disciples had forgotten their bread for the journey, a significant oversight in a culture without fast food and grocery stores on every corner. Jesus saw this as an opportunity to teach them. The world is full of illustrations of the gospel and Christian doctrine if we have eyes to see them. I was recently with a missionary who

told me about a waiter he was wanting to share his faith with. The missionary was trying to find an appropriate way to begin a conversation about the gospel. As he watched the waiter serving others, a connection dawned on him. The waiter was very attentive and diligent about his work. My friend took a chance and compared him with Jesus, the greatest servant and waiter there ever was. My friend told me the waiter still has not accepted Christ as his Savior, but his initial conversation seems to have warmed his heart to the gospel. My missionary friend continues to speak with the waiter and prays he will one day accept Christ as Savior. Look for things in the world around you to use as a means of sharing the gospel with others.

🔗: *Why did the disciples need to beware of the teaching of the Jewish leaders?*

🔗: *What sign indicated that the disciples might be susceptible to their teaching?*

The Jewish leaders refused to believe in Jesus. The disciples were strangely unattuned to spiritual matters, and Jesus knew they could easily be led astray by those who would cater to their worldly needs and desires. Thus, Jesus warned them of becoming attracted to the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

🔗: *In what areas are you susceptible to the false teachings of your society?*

🔗: *Why are we drawn to the teachings of the world?*

APPLICATION – Jesus warned the disciples to beware of the teaching of the Jewish leaders, and we need to beware of the false teachings of our culture as well. Our culture is quickly secularizing, and for years it has been pushing moral and religious standards that stand far outside the bounds of Christianity. We have become so wrapped up in our culture that we are hardly aware when it is widely out of step with our Christian beliefs and pulling us out of step as well. As followers of Jesus Christ, we need to be aware of how we allow our culture to shape our view of the world God has made. Some of us may need to consider stepping completely away from the productions of our culture.

Nearly every movie and TV show has for a long time challenged essential elements of a Christian worldview and morality. Almost every major sporting league is trying to steer the culture further away from anything resembling Christian morality. Some people will see any call for Christians to step away from the wider culture as defeatist, isolationist, or non-missional. How can we minister to a culture we do not know or understand? Others will claim that withdrawing from our culture is legalistic. Such concerns are warranted to some extent, but it is also possible to see stepping away from culture as a way to avoid the leaven of the Pharisees.

NEXT STEPS

How will you beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees? Drawing back from your engagement with the engines of cultural production can be difficult, but it is a step many Christians need to take, at least in some measure. Write down a plan this week to withdraw from one cultural institution you know is undermining your faith. Use the extra time you gain as a result to strengthen your faith. Read a Christian book. Attempt to engage a neighbor with the gospel. Try to enact your plan for a month and keep a journal of your experience. You may be surprised to see how the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees has worked its way into your life.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Father, I praise your name for laughing as the nations rage against you.

God, make me attuned to how you are moving in the world.

Lord Jesus, help me to be open to your ministry in the world and to the gospel you proclaim.

Jesus, keep me from the leaven of those who do not believe in you.

