

Jesus Builds His Church

Part 2 – The Called Out Ones

Matthew 16:1-12

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 22, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ²He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ ³And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. ⁴An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” Then he left them and went away.

⁵When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶Jesus said to them, “Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” ⁷They said to one another, “It is because we have brought no bread.” ⁸And becoming aware of it, Jesus said, “You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? ⁹Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰Or the seven loaves for the four thousand and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!” ¹²Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Matthew 16:1-12, NRSV)



Some religious leaders came to Jesus one day asking for proof. They had seen the miracles that defied explanation, and listened in on the teaching that captivated the crowds. They had heard the claims, that God was his Father, that he was sent from heaven. Now they wanted proof. “Show us a sign from heaven to prove to us you really are who you say you are.” This wasn’t just another miracle they were asking for. A sign was a step higher than a miracle, something like manna from heaven, or a voice from the clouds or from a burning bush. Show us something undeniable, Jesus, and then we will believe.

We live in a part of the world where the message of Christianity is widely known. Most people in America know at least the basics. Still, there are many, many

people around us who do not place their faith in Jesus. Some may acknowledge the historical reality of Christ, but make no efforts to live as his disciples and put his teaching into practice. And it makes me wonder, what would it take for such people to believe, to fully commit to Jesus above all else in life?

Think of somebody you know who is not a Christian. What stands in the way? What would it take for him or her to come to faith in Christ? Would there need to be proof, undeniable evidence that Jesus is actually who he claimed he was, the Son of God and the Savior of the world. If such a clear sign were given, would all doubts finally be erased?

The problem with the Pharisees and the Sadducees is that they were not sincere in their question. They had no intention of ever believing Jesus because they had no expectation that Jesus would be able to give them a sign. It was a trap. If he tried to give a sign, certainly he would fail and be exposed. If he refused, he would lose face with the crowds. Either way, they had him trapped.

I actually think that it’s the same with many people today. I will believe if you show me enough evidence. I will believe if you explain why a good God allows so much evil in the world. I would believe if Christians weren’t such hypocrites. I would believe if God answered my prayers. Sometimes these barriers to faith are legitimate. Just as often, however, they are excuses. Sometimes people who demand evidence would never believe even if loads of evidence were given.

Jesus refuses to give a sign, which at first might seem odd. Wouldn’t Jesus want to give people what they need to believe? Why wouldn’t he do everything possible to lead people to faith? But pay attention and you’ll see that Jesus isn’t saying that he *won’t* give them a sign, he’s saying that a more-than-sufficient sign has already been given, and that another sign won’t make a difference. And just like they can look at the clouds in the sky and interpret what weather is on the way, they should also be able to look at the already-given signs of the times and interpret whether or not Jesus is the real deal.

The sign of Jonah, that's what Jesus says they have been given. We know Jonah, right? We spent all summer studying this reluctant prophet. Imperfect as he was, remember that Jonah was sent by God to an unrepentant people with a message for them to turn back to God. On his journey to save these people, he spent three days buried in the belly of a great fish before he was spit back onto dry ground. In a much more significant way, Jesus was sent from heaven with a message of repentance to the whole world. On his journey to save the world, he spent three days in the grave before being resurrected to new life. That is the sign that was given, and Jesus is saying that if this is not enough to get you to believe, nothing will ever be enough to get you to believe.

I like how Pastor Tim Keller puts it, "If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching, but whether or not he rose from the dead."¹ Lots of people struggle to believe the things Jesus taught in the Bible. But that's the wrong place to start. If Jesus rose from the dead, you have to believe everything he taught. If he didn't, don't waste your time with him. He's a joke.

Jesus once told a parable about a rich man who so consistently rejected God in his life that he ended up in hell. In hell he petitions heaven to ask for somebody to be sent to earth to warn his brothers about the fate that also awaits them if they don't repent. But his request is denied. Do you remember why? He's told that his brothers already have everything they need to believe. And so even if somebody rose from the dead they still wouldn't believe.²

You know, we work hard to interpret so many things in our world based on the signs around us. We forecast the weather and the stock market. We dissect sports match-ups and make predictions about the outcome of every game. So much energy is invested into polling and predicting the results of elections. According to Jesus, we have been given everything we ever need to make a solid and accurate determination about his legitimacy. Yet we live in a world that is largely committed to rejecting Christ. Many, many people simply do not want to believe. And according to Jesus, it is an evil generation that protests to God that he not given us enough to believe when what we have been given is plenty. If much of our world were honest about it, what they would say is, "I'm never going to believe, no matter what sign you give me."

When Jesus is finally alone with his disciples after this exchange with the religious leaders, he gives them a warning. "**Watch out,**" he says, "**and beware the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**" As you might know, they had all just come from a lunch where Jesus took seven loaves of bread and a few small fish and miraculously fed a crowd of thousands. When Jesus brings up yeast, the disciples start thinking about bread again. They are afraid Jesus is upset with them because they forgot to bring along loaves to eat. It's a wonder Jesus puts up with these guys. Why are they still worrying about having enough to eat when Jesus just demonstrated that he can conjure up lunch out of thin air?

Jesus isn't talking about bread. It's a parable. To the Jewish mind in those days, yeast was always a symbol of evil. You know how yeast works. A little bit of yeast mixed into a lump of dough can change the composition of the whole lump. In our day we might say one bad apple spoils the whole bunch. Same idea. This is Jesus' point, that there was something about these religious leaders and their teaching that was extremely dangerous and had the potential to mislead or corrupt these disciples. And I think that the warning he gives to those first disciples is a warning he also gives to us, disciples in our day. We must also beware of the yeast that is around us in this world. It just takes a little bit to corrupt.

Last week we explored the idea that to be a follower of Christ, a member of his family the church, is to become an alien and a stranger in this world.³ This is the reality that Jesus is emphasizing here. Again, the world around us is committed to rejecting Christ and, in turn, rejecting God. Therefore, we must be careful to not be influenced by the thinking, values and ways of the world around us, or we too will ultimately reject Christ. And it doesn't take much. Again, a little yeast can transform the whole lump of dough.

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were very, very religious Jews. But their inner character did not match their outward claims. Jesus called them whitewashed tombs.⁴ It's a striking image. On the outside a grave can be beautiful – carved marble headstone, manicured grass, fresh flowers. But inside the grave there is nothing but death, a rotting, stinking corpse. These were people who gave the outward impression of being godly. They cared deeply about the respect of others. But it was all dead legalism, an effort to put God in their debt by their moral behavior, when all along the thoughts and motives of their hidden hearts were corrupt.

beautiful but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of uncleanness. 28 So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

¹ Source unknown.

² See Luke 16:19-31

³ See 1st Peter 2:11

⁴ Matthew 23:27-28 - "**Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look**

There is no shortage in our time of modern-day Pharisees. Lots of people of many kinds are rigorous in their religious practices, and forceful about their doctrinal convictions, but are not ultimately committed to humbly glorifying God with their lives. Religious belief like this that is only skin-deep, and never transforms the human heart to a heart of love, is one of the most dangerous, destructive forces on earth. The Pharisees in that day, and our day alike, are yeast to be avoided.

The Sadducees in Jesus' day were also religious, but were at the same time deeply involved in the political realm. While Pharisees wanted to reject Rome, the Sadducees got in bed with Rome for their own benefit. They were willing to compromise some of the long-held convictions of their faith to gain in return political power and material wealth.

There is also no shortage of Sadducees in our day. How many people are willing to compromise biblical truth in the pursuit of political power or material wealth, or simply for acceptance by those who sit in places of influence? Some even claim to have pure motives, that the kingdom of God is best advanced through material and political means. The Sadducees in that day, and our day alike, are also yeast to be avoided.

What Jesus is plainly saying here is something that is consistently affirmed all through scripture. You cannot be a citizen of this world, committed to its ways and values, and at the same time be a citizen of God's Kingdom, committed ultimately to Christ. One is completely foreign to the other, and dual-citizenship is not allowed. The church, if it is to function as the church in this world, must first be called out of the world and accept that we will never again feel at home in the world.

Like many of you, I've spent significant time in other parts of the world. This past spring I spent five weeks in a remote part of Kenya. Though I was there with other westerners, we were often out in the community where there are no other westerners. In Kenya I am called *mzungu*. It's a Swahili word that just means "white person." When I was out in the community of the city we lived in, there was not a single moment when I forgot that I was a *mzungu*. There was not a single Kenyan who looked at me and mistook me for a native of the area. I looked like a foreigner, talked like a foreigner, dressed like a foreigner, ate like a foreigner. My Kenyan friends told me that I even danced like a foreigner. I'm not sure it was a compliment. And I'm telling you, I could spend the next 20 years in Kenya,

and there would never come a day when I would completely blend in.

Here's one of the main problems with the American church. We blend in. Numerous studies have shown that the average member of the American church holds largely the same values and priorities as the average American. It's not hard to find congregations where nearly everything promoted on a Sunday morning is perfectly in line with the agenda of either the Republican or Democratic party, depending on the politics of that congregation. One leader at the Barna Group recently concluded, "Evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general. Every day, the church is becoming more like the world it allegedly seeks to change."⁵

Let's own this. How radically do our lives differ from those around us in this world who do not profess to follow Jesus? For some of us the differences are stark. I do know Christians who really don't fit in, whose deep commitment to Jesus makes them aliens in this culture. But in many cases – and I don't excuse myself here – we blend in disturbingly well. Don't believe me? Think of the things Jesus commands of his followers and consider just how strange your life would seem to others in America if you lived in complete conformity to these commands.

You wouldn't pursue material wealth as a means to satisfaction in life. How un-American is that! You would care about the poor as much as you cared about your own financial security. In fact, you would view the poor and outcast with as much interest and dignity as you view the rich and famous. You would be quick to forgive and bless those who were quick to harm and curse you. You would show honor to political leaders for whom you did not vote, and with whom you do not agree. You would care as much about the flourishing of other nations as you care about the flourishing of America. You would not demonize others. You would speak differently, words of kindness instead of cruelty, gentleness instead of harshness. You would live free from anxiety or worry, regardless of your circumstances. You would consider others better than yourself, and treat them accordingly. You would respect the laws of the land, even when those laws are inconvenient or costly. You would consume media that edifies, with content that is pure and honorable, praiseworthy and commendable. You would work hard and aim for excellence in your job, even when you don't like your job, even when the boss isn't looking. And then you would practice Sabbath each week and rest every seventh day, even when the work isn't done. You

⁵ Cited at <https://www.clgonline.org/sermonblog/2022/3/13/aliens-and-strangers-1-peter-29-12>

would keep commitments, even when better opportunities come along, staying true to your word. You would care very little for what others think of you, concerning yourself only with the praise of your heavenly Father. You would willingly make sacrifices that benefit the larger community, even when such sacrifices bring no benefit to you personally.

I could go on, but hopefully I'm said enough to be clear how following Jesus in America will keep you from blending in in America.

Jesus at one point said that the church is salt of the earth. In Matthew 5:13 he declared, **"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot."**⁶ If salt tastes exactly the same as the food it is meant to season, what's the purpose of salt. It has none. It's worthless. This gets at the heart of Jesus' warning to us here about the yeast of the world. We must be called out of the world so that we can live lives that are utterly distinct and countercultural from the world. That's true in America as much as it's true anywhere in the world, as American culture is contrary to the way of Christ just like every other culture in the world is contrary to the way of Christ. We will be no good to the world if we are the same as the world. If there is no separation, there is no mission.

This has always been the case. All the way back to the beginning when God called Abraham and Sarah to first establish a covenant people in this world, he said to Abraham, **"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."**⁷ As Abraham followed God's call, God promised to enlarge his family into a distinct nation, a chosen people, what eventually became Israel. And God promised to bless Israel. But do you remember why God said he would bless them? He says to Abraham, **"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."**⁸

Do you see the pattern? God's people are called out of the world to be sent back into the world as a blessing to the world. This is not about separating from people. That's not what Jesus did. He didn't call followers to himself and then lead them into the wilderness and form a commune. He called followers out of the ways of the culture, but then remained right in the midst of the culture, rubbing elbows with every imaginable kind of

person, as a way to be a godly influence on the culture. Jesus told his disciples to avoid the *teaching* of the Pharisees and Sadducees, not to avoid the Pharisees and Sadducees themselves.

The last night before his crucifixion, as Jesus is in the garden agonizing in prayer, this is one of the things he prays about when he prays for his disciples in the days to come, his church which will soon be established. Consider what he prays,

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.⁹

I like how commentator Dale Bruner puts it, "The world is our goal, not our source; our place of work, not our measure of worth; our mission, not our Messiah; the persons whom we are to love and, yet, much of whose motives we are to distrust."¹⁰

If we do not allow ourselves to be called out of the world and to accept a life in the world of aliens and strangers, we will go unnoticed by the world, largely ignored. It makes sense, because why would anybody pay attention to what we have to offer if our lives are qualitatively the same as the lives of everybody else. If your yard is as full of weeds as my yard, I'm not coming to you for gardening tips. Yet, if we do choose obedience to Christ, allowing him, rather than the world, to shape our lives, one of two things will happen. In many cases we will be rejected, even mocked or scorned. In some places of the world, faithful discipleship to Christ might get you locked up or killed. Christians die for their faith every day because they refuse to get in line with the world around them.

But there is another possibility other than rejection. In some cases, there will be people in the world around us who look at the transformed lives they see in the church and discover in those lives a joy which is largely unknown in our world, a peace which endures even when circumstances go south, a love that crosses so many boundaries it cannot be explained, and a hope that takes away all fear, even the fear of death. In these

⁶ This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁷ Genesis 12:1

⁸ Genesis 12:2-3

⁹ John 17:14-19

¹⁰ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2012), 995.

cases, there will be people who, through our witness, are drawn to Christ and the life he died to give them as well.

My friend Mamusha, the Ethiopian pastor who inspired this sermon series, has a beautiful analogy along these lines. He compares a faithful Christian to a piece of beautiful artwork. When you come across a stunning painting in a museum, one that was obviously painted by a world class master, you glance to the corner to see who the artist was. That's your first question, "Who did this?" Artwork doesn't glorify itself, but brings glory to the artist. When French impressionist Claude Monet painted his collection of water lily paintings, people didn't walk away singing the praises of water lilies. And if you go to see one of these paintings, I doubt you'll stand there marveling at the quality of the paint or the superiority of the canvas. No, you look to the corner of the painting, discover the name of the artist, and then stand there in awe of a person who could create a thing of such beauty.

This is what is meant to happen with your life, even more so with our lives collectively as we live them out in community before the watching world. The unbelieving world around us, at least some of them, will be captivated by what they see in us, examine our very different lives and be so struck by the differences that they look to the corner to find the name of the artist who would create a thing of such beauty. I have a friend who is a very accomplished artist. Whenever she finishes a painting she puts three letters in the bottom corner where usually the name of the artist would go. GTG. Glory to God. I've always loved that. She wants any admirer of her paintings to ultimately know that any glory given should be given to God alone, the one who inspired not only the painting, but the subject captured by the paint.

What would it take for unbelieving people around us in the world to recognize the truth of the Christian gospel and the life offered to all who would believe and follow its author? It is Jesus' desire that the world would encounter the church and give him glory because of what the world finds in us. For that to happen we must first be called out of the world. If we are not, if we blend into the world around us, the gospel is cancelled by the way we live. The most important work Jesus is doing in this world is building the church for his glory. As he does, may we allow him to make us the sign the world needs to believe he really is all that we know him to be.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 16:1-12 again. What do you notice here in Jesus' teaching, particularly as it relates to the church?
2. Jesus says here that it is an "evil and adulterous generation" that asks God for a sign to prove himself. What does this mean?
3. Jesus gives a stern warning to this disciples here to watch out for the "yeast" around them in this world. What is the danger he is highlighting? How does this translate to our day?
4. As a Christian, how often do you feel like a stranger and an outsider in American society?
5. In an interview with *Christianity Today*, African Christian and missions scholar Dr. Lamin Sanneh declared, "The cultural captivity of Christianity in the West is nearly complete."¹¹ Do you agree? Has the church in our part of the world largely blended into the worldly culture around us?
6. In Jesus' teaching on the his followers (i.e. the church) being the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13), he says that if we lose our distinctiveness from the world we lose our purpose and become good for nothing in the world. Is Jesus really telling us that the mission of the church in this world depends upon our distinctiveness from the world? And if so, why?
7. If the church truly lived in complete obedience to Jesus' teachings and example, what are the ways we would most stand out in American society?
8. What is the main thing Jesus is teaching you/us here? How are you/we being called to live differently?



Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.

How does following Jesus make us different in the world? Is it easy to be different? Is it good to be different?

¹¹ Jonathan J. Bonk, "The Defender of the Good News: Questioning Lamin Sanneh", *Christianity Today*, October 1, 2003.