

Explore the Bible Series for September 23: Always trust Christ

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Always trust Christ

- Matthew 8:1-9:34

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In Matthew's Gospel, people who are "religious" often misunderstand the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus. The Pharisees have problems with Jesus' authority. They understand him as a threat to their position of power within the Jewish community. The Sadducees, who did not accept notions of an afterlife, spirits and angels, debate with him over interpretation of the Law and vehemently oppose him on the idea of the resurrection. The chief priests, elders and scribes worked with the Roman government to bring Jesus to trial and considered plans for his execution.

The disciples are no exception. They also do not completely understand Jesus or his teaching about the kingdom of God. Jesus admonished them for their lack of understanding. How is that those who are closest to Jesus—those whom we may consider religious, righteous or spiritual—so frequently misunderstand him?

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I once heard about a father who told his son the story of Jesus calming the storm (Matthew 8:23-27). The father explained that one afternoon Jesus and his disciples got into a boat together to cross from one side of the lake to the other. Once they set off from shore, Jesus fell fast asleep. While they were traveling a great storm came upon them. Waves began rocking the boat so severely water started seeping over the edge. Needless to say, the disciples became alarmed and distressed. They woke Jesus up from his sleep and asked him to save them, for they were sinking and were all going to drown if he didn't do something. He calmed the storm, the waves ceased and the wind stopped, but only after he had questioned his disciples, questioned his disciples' faith and asked them why they were afraid.

The father then asked his son, "So what do you think the moral to the story is?"

His son replied, "Don't ever wake Jesus up from a nap!"

Misunderstanding Jesus

Misunderstanding Jesus is a common problem. We all do it.

In the passages under consideration for this week, a Roman centurion, a woman suffering from hemorrhages and two blind men are extolled for their faith. In Matthew 8:10, Jesus is astonished by the faith of the

centurion: "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." He tells the woman who had been subject to bleeding for 12 years: "Take heart, daughter, your faith has healed you" (Matthew 9:22). While healing the two blind men, Jesus says, "According to your faith will it be done to you" (Matthew 9:29).

Each of these is an example of faith. These individuals seem unlikely characters to receive such high marks from Jesus. After all, they're not your typical upright, religious characters: a soldier employed by a despised secular government, a woman with a severe chronic illness and two blind men.

No matter how you look at it, these people do not have the same righteous ring as "Peter," "James," "John," or the "a disciple of Christ." Yet Matthew regards these unlikely models as exceptional examples, especially whenever compared to the disciples.

When speaking of faith to his own disciples, Jesus offers strong rebuke: "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" (Matthew 8:26). The centurion, the woman and the two men who had lost their vision all needed healing. When his disciples were asked by the Pharisees why their master ate with tax-collectors and sinners, Jesus replied: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:12-13).

You may have heard it said: "Politicians need Jesus." "Homosexuals need Jesus." "Muslims need Jesus." "Liberals need Jesus." "Hollywood needs Jesus." From a Christian perspective, each of these statements has a ring of truth to it. But each of these statements also falls short of Jesus' message. We all need Jesus. If all we can do is point our finger at someone else and say, "You need Jesus," then we've drastically misunderstood the gospel, thereby, rendering ourselves clean, healthy and virtuous.

According to the New Testament, all have sinned and we all need Christ. As soon as we turn the end of our finger back on ourselves and say “I need Jesus,” we come closer to the Christian message. Self-transformation is central and essential to the gospel of Christ Jesus.

Being the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,” does not give Christians free license to display their commitment to Christ through outward forms of righteousness. Praying openly for all in public to see is not the same as standing behind the sneeze-guard in a buffet line serving others in a soup kitchen. The first has the tendency to draw attention to one’s own virtue or piety; the other subtly demonstrates compassion by feeding the hungry. Speaking righteous words and living like Christ are not the same. The two are worlds apart.

A Christian life reflects upon the teachings of Jesus constantly. It asks the difficult questions. Have I wronged others? What are my weaknesses or blind spots? How can Christ enable me to overcome my shortcomings? How can I be less selfish, more considerate, more giving and love others, even those who cause me harm. The Spirit of Christ empowers those who believe that they are in need of a “physician.” Those who consider themselves “religiously or spiritually healthy” will have a difficult time hearing Jesus’ summons, for he did not come to call “the righteous, but sinners.”

Discussion questions

- How is your faith like that of the disciples?
- Does your faith have something in common with the Roman centurion, the hemorrhaging woman and the two blind men?
- Why is it that those who are so close to Jesus frequently misunderstand him?

- As followers of Jesus are we surprised when we see God's love extended to "unlikely models"?

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