

Are You Only Attracted to the God of Your Own Understanding?

Matthew 8:5-10; 13:53-58

March 14, 2010

We have two stories before us this morning – one in which great faith is demonstrated, and the other in which Christ is rejected. It is the same Christ who appeared before both sets of people – the Roman officer and the hometown folks at the synagogue. What would make one person accept Christ for who he is, and another group of people not be able to accept him?

Isn't it interesting? God is unlimited in power; however He seems to allow us to limit what He can do in our lives based upon our willingness to approach Him in faith.

We don't know what the Roman officer knew about Jesus. Perhaps he had been near when Jesus had healed someone. But we are not told that Jesus had done anything extraordinary right in front of him. Yet, the Roman officer displayed humility and faith in asking for Jesus' help.

In the other passage, the people seemed to have either witnessed miracles or heard about them. We *do* know that they experienced first-hand Jesus' powerful teaching. He taught with great authority – perhaps with the authority of one who was not only a world-renowned expert on a subject, but the creator of the subject or idea.

How did they respond? Not with faith and humility, but with scoffing and skepticism. They couldn't get past their preconceived ideas about who Jesus was. They couldn't get past their memory of the little boy who used to run through the street in Nazareth. The home folks weren't ready to understand that not only could Jesus teach the scriptures, He was the incarnation of those scriptures – the Word of God made flesh.

While we are not Jesus, perhaps you have experienced something similar (on a much smaller scale) in your own life. I know I have. When I went back for my 20th high school reunion, it was interesting talking to folks and learning what they had done with their lives. When they asked me, "What do you do for a living?" Some folks found it amusing, others found it hard to believe, when I answered, "I'm a Methodist minister." They knew me in my younger days, which I won't describe to you. It should suffice to say that Sarah doesn't think she would have wanted to date me in my high school or college days. I'm still the same person that the bishop laid hands on; however, I'm not sure some of my old friends could get past high school Ross to get to Pastor Ross.

Jesus has a way of demolishing people's expectations of Him. He always turns out to be far greater and far more wonderful than anybody's preconceived notions of Him. People so often have it in their minds that Jesus "should" be a certain way. They themselves, after all, are a certain way; and they have it in mind that He must be like they are. And yet, when

they finally encounter Him for themselves—either as the people of old did in the days when He walked upon the earth; or as they do today, in the reading of the pages of Scripture—He always proves to be something quite different from their narrow expectations of Him.

One of the ongoing challenges facing many people in the world is the temptation to make God over in light of our own expectations, or in our image. We also tend to shun what we don't understand. Those parts of God, or God's behavior we don't comprehend, we tend to dismiss as irrelevant.

Some folks go so far as to dismiss God entirely. Atheist Sam Harris writes, "Somewhere in the world a man has abducted a little girl. Soon he will rape, torture, and kill her. If an atrocity of this kind [is] not occurring at precisely this moment, it will happen in a few hours, or days at most. Such is the confidence we can draw from the statistical laws that govern the lives of six billion human beings. The same statistics also suggest that this girl's parents believe – *at this very moment* – an all-powerful and all-loving God is watching over them and their family. Are they right to believe this? Is it *good* that they believe this? No."

Harris is dismissing God completely because he has reduced God to some sort of Hall Monitor of the Universe. He wishes God to abide by *his* rules and take care of the world the way *he* thinks is right. Harris is only attracted to the god of his own understanding.

We Christians are guilty of the same thing. We may not become atheists, but many hold a grudge against God for something that happened to a loved-one. They stop coming to church, stop praying – they cut themselves off from a relationship with God.

Fortunately for us, God is greater than we are. Fortunately for us, his compassion, forgiveness, love and justice run deeper than we would ever even consider displaying in our own lives. This makes the presence of Jesus somewhat unintelligible to us. I don't think I will ever understand fully how much my God loves me. For that matter, I believe there are a great many things about God that I will probably never understand. Perhaps you are the same way. I don't know about you, but I find comfort in the inscrutability of God. If I understood everything about how God's will and mind works, then I must ask myself, "Is this really God." If a finite mind can comprehend the fullness of the deity, then it must not be a deity.

In Isaiah 55:8, God gives us what should be for us very comforting words:

*"For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).*

I hear those words and I am comforted. When Sarah and I had our first child, I found that there was one time I could always count on truly feeling like a parent – that was when my baby was asleep in her carrier on the back seat of the car. The fact that my child would go to sleep communicated to me that although she did not understand everything about who we were and how parents function, she felt that she was safe and secure in the care of those big people in the front seat. She accepted Sarah and me for who we were, in spite of her lack of understanding.

You and I will never fully understand our God. We will never understand why He acts in ways that *seem* inconsistent to us. Paul Thigpen writes, “The reason, I believe, is this: God’s purposes never change. But because we’re finite and fallen, we never come to an *exhaustive* understanding of [those purposes]. So we’re continually discovering ‘new’ aspects of His will that were there all along.”

How much we lose when we won’t—by faith—receive Christ as He truly is! I encourage you to not be attracted to the God of your own understanding, for if you are, then you aren’t attracted to the One True God, but to a faulty and false copy. God calls you to himself, and shares with you what you need to know. Accept Him for the God that he is, and ask the Holy Spirit to give you comfort and peace in his care.