

# Faces in a Crowd

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John 12:12-19

April 14, 2019

## Introduction:

There's a well-known parable that originated in India about three blind men who heard there was an elephant nearby and went to investigate. They all went over to touch it in order to find out more about it, since none of them had ever encountered an elephant before. The first blind man touched the elephant's trunk and said, "The elephant is a long, round thing. It is like a giant snake." The second blind man touched the elephant's leg and said, "The elephant is tall and firm, just like a tree." The third blind man touched the elephant's tail and said. The elephant is thin and long. It is like a rope."

Of course, seeing how you're all familiar with what elephants look like, you know that none of the blind men were correct in describing the elephant. Each man was prevented from describing the elephant as it truly was due to their blindness. While they had certain aspects right of the elephant, they couldn't see the whole picture, and as a result their understanding of what an elephant fell short of reality, or if you'll excuse the pun, you could say their view was truncated by their blindness.

This morning we're going to consider three groups of people who also were blind and unable to see things accurately, but in this case, the blindness is a spiritual blindness as opposed to physical blindness. And instead of an elephant, the object of their attention is Jesus Christ. Like the blind men with the elephant, their spiritual blindness causes them to fall short of truly understanding what is taking place right before their eyes.

So if you would, please open your Bibles with me to John 12, which in the pew Bibles can be found on pg. 899. Today is the Sunday before Easter which means its Palm Sunday, and so this morning we're going to take time to consider the Apostle John's interpretation of it. This account of Palm Sunday provides us an opportunity to consider what takes places from three different perspectives: first from the disciples, second from the crowds, and third from the Pharisees. And as we look at these three sets of faces in the crowd, we're going to discover three different ways spiritual blindness can prevent people from seeing Jesus as he is, and therefore can cause us to not respond to him in worship as we ought. So this morning we're going to seek to answer this question:

## What prevents us from worshipping Christ as King?

### Setting the scene (v. 12-15)

But before we do that, let's see how John sets up the scene for us first in v. 12-15. As I mentioned earlier, this takes place the week before Easter, which means this is the final week of Jesus' ministry. For the past three years, he's been traveling throughout Israel, teaching, healing the sick, casting out demons, and performing other miracles. Shortly before this, Jesus had performed one of his greatest miracles: he had raised Lazarus from the dead. Needless to say, Jesus has at this point become a household name. You don't teach the way Jesus taught and do the miracles Jesus did without word getting around.

With this in mind, look at what John says in v. 12-13. **“The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!’”**

Jewish pilgrims from all over were descending on Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast. Undoubtedly many of these pilgrims had heard about Jesus; perhaps some had been healed by him personally or had heard the authority of his teaching firsthand. Word got leaked somewhere along the line that Jesus was going to be there; in fact, someone scouted ahead and informed the crowd that Jesus was indeed on his way up the road. So rather than waiting for him to arrive, the people go out of the city gates to meet him. They grab palm branches and, as we learn from other gospel accounts, spread the branches and their garments along the road. They then shout out in the words of Psalm 118, saying, **“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord...”** Those are words that were used as a messianic title. By saying these things, they were proclaiming that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

The focus then turns from what the crowd is doing to what Jesus does in v. 14-15. Look there with me. **“And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, ‘Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!’”** Normally the fact that Jesus was entering the city riding on a donkey wouldn’t necessarily be particularly noteworthy, but John wants to remind us this fact was actually a fulfillment of prophecy for Zechariah 9:9. So John is pointing out to us that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the long-awaited king in fulfillment of OT prophecies.

So that’s the scene in a nutshell: Jesus is coming up the road, riding a donkey in fulfillment of prophecy, the crowds are eagerly awaiting him, cheering, calling out to him words of praise, lining the road with palm branches. It would seem Jesus is at the top of his game. After three years of ministry, everything is finally coming together. People are at last recognizing who he is, celebrating his arrival into Jerusalem; everything is great and, in a few moments, we could expect John to go ahead and conclude his gospel with the words, “...and they all lived happily ever after. The end.” Right?

Well, the scene isn’t quite as cheery as it seems. At first glance it looks encouraging, but now that John has painted the scene *externally*, John’s going to give us some insight into what’s going on *internally* in the hearts and minds of those who are watching it all unfold. We’re going to see that the blind men really don’t see the elephant here: the people don’t truly see Jesus as he is because each of the three groups of observers in this account have a certain kind of spiritual blindness that prevents them from seeing Jesus as they ought, and therefore it prevents them from giving him the proper worship he deserves. And their blindness is often a reflection of our own.

So let’s now turn our attention to the ways we’re prevented from worshiping Christ as King by examining what John says about three different groups of people who are watching all this but are yet sadly not entirely grasping it. So the first reason we sometimes don’t worship Christ as King is that...

## 1. We are prevented by confusion (v. 16)

People are cheering, palm branches are waving, the road is lined with people eager to see Jesus... and what are the disciples doing? They're scratching their heads. Look at v. 16 in your Bibles with me. **“His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him.”**

The disciples don't understand it. They don't comprehend what this all means. You'd think they of all people would make the connection, that they would understand who Jesus was, in fulfilling Messianic prophecy right before their very eyes, but they don't. Their confusion causes them to miss out on worshiping Jesus as they ought.

Confusion about Jesus can come from a few different sources; let me give you three of them. First, it's most basic cause is **ignorance**. Some people don't worship Jesus as they ought because they're ignorant of him. Perhaps in this moment the disciples were unaware of this prophecy from the book of Zechariah about the Messiah riding on a donkey. God was fulfilling his promises but they were ignorant of the promise. Maybe Peter, John, and the rest had skipped out that day when that passage was read at the synagogue. They couldn't understand what these events were communicating about Jesus because they were unaware of Scripture's teaching in this regard.

Needless to say, people can't worship Christ as Lord if they know nothing about him, can they? As Paul said in Romans 10, how can they call on him whom they've never heard? Which is of course the most basic need for global missions: we need to send out missionaries to tell those who are ignorant of God's provision for them in Christ. People cannot worship Christ if they've never heard of him.

The second cause for confusion comes not from being ignorant of Christ because you've never heard of him, but rather from **misinformation**. Sometimes Christ is not worshiped as he ought to be because of some misinformation – some incorrect facts or assumptions – that people believe about him.

For example, in our culture, virtually nobody is ignorant of Christ. You don't live in America and not have at least some passing knowledge of what a Bible is or what a cross symbolizes. But while we're not ignorant of Christ, we can certainly have misinformation about Christ. Many people regard Jesus to be a great teacher, like Buddha or Confucius, but nothing more. Now that's partly true – Jesus was a great teacher – but like the three blind men, they're not seeing the whole elephant. Jesus also claimed to be God, that he was far more than one of many paths to truth, but that he himself was Truth, that he was Lord of the universe, the Judge of all mankind, and the Savior by whom only could we be made right with God. Misinformation that leaves Jesus only as a moral philosopher will prevent you from worshiping him as God.

Finally, confusion can come from **forgetfulness**. We're not ignorant of who Christ is and we're not believing misinformation about Christ, but sometimes we forget. Maybe the disciples were taught about these messianic prophecies Jesus was fulfilling, but in

the moment, it slipped their minds. Eventually the Holy Spirit helped them remember, but at the time, they weren't making the connection in the heads.

Isn't that too often true of us? How often do we simply forget the promises of God in the midst of life's trials? Instead of worshiping God by expressing faith in his sovereign goodness in our lives, we panic and worry and act as if God never promised to provide for his children far more than he provides for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field! We know the truth, but we forget it. And as a result, we're prevented from giving God the worship he deserves because of our own forgetfulness.

So how do we avoid all this from happening to us? Very simply, we need to always go back to the Word of God. Because we're forgetful, because misinformation sometimes seeps in and sows seeds of confusion in our hearts, we need to have our minds continually refreshed by regularly reading Scripture. God's Word can clear out the cobwebs from our minds. Scripture reminds us of truth and corrects erroneous notions about God that creep in from our surrounding culture. We need to be diligent to study the Bible and have a mind transformed by the Word of God, so you in turn can be the kind of worshipper God would have you be, one who worships in spirit and in truth.

So then, the first reason why we might now worship Christ as King is because of confusion. But now we need to turn our attention to the second hindrance that can prevent us from worshiping Christ as we ought. Our second point is that...

## 2. We are prevented by selfishness (v. 17-18)

On this point, we need to look a little more closely at the crowd. Look at v. 17-18 with me. **“The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign.”** Now we might be tempted to think of the crowds as the “good guys” of the story because, after all, they're lining up along the street, throwing down palm branches, and shouting out acclamations of praise. What's wrong with that?

Well, while the outward actions look good, I have some doubts about the motivations behind them. First, let's consider what we just read. John tells us the reason they went out to meet him on Palm Sunday was because they heard about Jesus having raised Lazarus from the dead. That kind of stunt will draw a crowd, but not necessarily bring about genuine worship. As is often the case in Christ's ministry, people came to him because they wanted to see signs, miracles, healings, etc. And if he's now raising the dead, well, nothing is quite as spectacular as that!

See, John is telling us this in v. 18 because he wants us to realize that this isn't the cheering of genuine worship, but rather more of a gawking to see more miracles, to butter him up perhaps so he might entertain them more with his wonderful tricks. In fact, if they're lucky, Jesus might even perform a healing for one of them. So why not come out; what do they have to lose? Everyone loves a show and the biggest ticket in all of Israel is bringing his act into town. Why not give him a roaring round of applause and perhaps he'll even make an encore performance of what he did with Lazarus.

Let's face it, sometimes, Jesus is "worshiped" not because of who he is but what people believe he can do for them. It's a selfish worship, if one can even call it worship. As long as Jesus keeps turning water into wine, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead, of course people will flock to him. Who doesn't want a chance to win the lottery and grab the golden ticket?

And don't think this doesn't happen still today. The whole prosperity gospel operates on this premise. Preach about a God who will give you health, wealth, and success if you come to church and sing some songs and put some clever principles into practice and you can draw a crowd so huge it will fill up a sports arena! Turn Christ into a gumball dispenser who will give you material blessings when you place the quarter of obedience into him, and you'll have no trouble finding a crowd.

But there is another clue here that their motivations are more selfish than genuine, and that comes from the palm branches. The waving of palms and laying down of coats by the people was no accident or coincidence. Palms were used as signs of victory and of military achievement. The Romans gave palms to the victors in the Roman games and emperors gave them to their subjects following military conquests. The Jewish people had picked up on this and in 1 Maccabees we find the Jewish people waving palm branches to celebrate the newly established independence of Jerusalem and Judea. The crowd believed Jesus was the "King," that is, they believed he was the Messiah who had finally come to establish Israel's independence from Rome, to liberate them politically. They wanted a Messiah who would be their political hero. In fact, the whole scene replicates a military leader's triumphant entry into a city. The crowd believed surely this was the time Jesus would rise up and lead the revolt against Rome.

And even today we still want this kind of Jesus, this type of Messiah. We want a Jesus who will bless our political views, bless the wars we engage in, and who will be "on our side" against our foreign enemies. Whenever someone writes about, "What would Jesus do?" in terms of who he'd vote for or what he would drive, it somehow always ends up being exactly the same position held by the writer of the article. Surprise, surprise! We can easily be like the crowd: we can worship Jesus because of what we want him to be, for what we believe he can do for us.

The only problem is Jesus wasn't that kind of Messiah. Jesus didn't come to liberate the nation of Israel from Rome any more than he came to help your favorite candidate get elected. He came to suffer God's wrath for our sins. And once the crowd realized Jesus wasn't going to do any of the things they expected him to do – heal their sick, raise their dead, lead their revolution – what happened? Five days later, instead of chanting "Hosanna!" they were chanting "Crucify him!" This worship wasn't genuine. It was there when it looked like Jesus was going to do what they selfishly wanted and it vanished like smoke when it became clear he wouldn't.

So then we've seen how the disciples were prevented from worshiping Jesus because of ignorance first and then second, how selfishness prevented the crowds from truly worshiping him. Now we need to quickly consider our third and final cause preventing people from worshiping Jesus, and that is...

### 3. We are prevented by pride

The last group of people we need to look at are the Pharisees. Look back in your Bible with me at v. 19. **“So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.’”** The Pharisees are the Jewish religious leaders who you’d think would recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah and welcome him. Instead, they see this mass exodus of people heading out along the road to greet Jesus and they get all pouty about it. They’re like the child who needs all the attention, who gets jealous when the new kid comes along and everyone starts paying attention to the new kid instead of him.

The Pharisees are blinded by their pride. They want to be the center of attention. They want to be praised by the crowds for their wisdom, their righteousness, their status. But Christ threatens all that. He’s thrown everything off balance. All the things they wished to gain in their pride are being quickly siphoned away in the presence of Christ. As a result, when they look at Christ, they only see things through the lens of what they have to either gain or lose. Their prideful desire hindered them from worshiping Christ.

Let me quickly give you four things that in their pride they cannot let go of:

First, they’re concerned about their **position**. They’re the religious leaders. They’re the keepers and interpreters of the law. How dare this Jesus fellow come in and say, “You have it said... but I say...” as if he knows more than they do! Jesus’ teaching threatens to make them look like a bunch of schmucks!

Second, they want to hold on to their **power**. As religious leaders who interpreted the Law and applied it to the everyday lives of the people, they wielded great power. They had authority over the masses; their rules and regulations created a hierarchy of power with them being untouchable at the pinnacle. But Jesus was undercutting their power in the eyes of the people with his teaching.

Third, they loved to receive **praise**. Because of their position and power, people looked up to them and respected them. John 12:43 says, *“They loved praise from men more than praise from God.”* Jesus threatens to take that all away as people praise him while he continues to make fools of the Pharisees in public debates.

Finally, the Pharisees are concerned about **politics**. Jesus was a real threat to their political safety. In John 11:48, they say *“If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”* National interests were at stake!

So pride – pride in their position, their power, they love for praise, and the political concerns they had – this pride caused the Pharisees to cross their arms, look at this spectacle of Jesus riding into Jerusalem amid the shouts of praise from the people, and turn away in disgust. Their pride blinded them to who Jesus was and as a result, they could not bring themselves to worship him as they ought.

Truth be told, we're not any different today. Pride still prevents people from worshiping Jesus as we ought. Consider for a moment these four areas I just mentioned:

- Worshiping Jesus can be a threat to our **position**. If you're in a job that requires you to do some questionable things, like cover up numbers or turn a blind eye to corporate corruption, being a Christian can cost you your position. Or in some circles openly acknowledging your faith or taking a stand on a biblical morality can be very costly to you.
- Worshiping Jesus can be a threat to our **power**. Your influence on others can be greatly diminished if you're open about your faith. People might write you off as one of those right-wing, ignorant, nut jobs. Your opinion might not carry much weight anymore in your circle of influence because of your profession of faith.
- Worshiping Jesus can threaten the **praise** we receive from others. Become a Christian and old friends are going to make fun of you. They're not going to think you're cool when you refuse to go out drinking with them, or cuss like you once did, or want to spend time with you when you start telling them about repenting of sin and trusting in Christ. Worshiping Christ in your life is not going to get you on the fast-track of popularity at school. More often than not, people will label you as *intolerant, self-righteous, homophobic, ignorant*, and so on.
- Finally, following Jesus can have **political** ramifications. I've talked with people who won't consider Christianity because they see it as a threat to their political views. They think to be a Christian they have to vote in such and such a way and they refuse to do that. Christ is a threat to them politically, therefore they won't bother to consider if what he says is true.

The same danger the Pharisees faced we also face: our pride may keep us from worshiping Jesus as we ought. The cost of losing that which we value and take pride in: our position, our influence, our reputation, our political views, can keep us from humbly bowing our knees and worshiping Christ as king.

## Conclusion

So then, confusion, selfishness, and pride are all things that can prevent us from worshiping Christ. It happened on Palm Sunday and it can still happen to us today. And this ought to be cause for us to examine our heart, because while Palm Sunday describes Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem nearly 2000 years ago, that's not the only triumphal entry spoken of in Scripture. The book of Revelation speaks of Christ entering back into history as the triumphant King of King and Lord of Lords, to set up his kingdom here on earth. And this time, he's not coming humbly on a little donkey; he's coming in majesty, as conqueror over sin, death, and the devil.

And so, the question remains: will we worship him as we ought? When Christ returns, will he find us celebrating his return, living lives of joyful obedience while gladly carrying our cross of suffering and shame, of loss and persecution, for his sake, counting all things loss for the sake of knowing Christ our Lord? Or will we instead fall into the same errors as our

predecessors, and be prevented from worshiping our coming King because of ignorance, because of self-centeredness, or because of pride? Let's make it our goal to be men and women who throw off every hindrance to worship and with unsurpassed joy, worship Christ Jesus as King: the One who was, who is, and who is to come. Let's pray.

**This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2019.**