

Jews: Would've Should've Could've Recognized Jesus Christ

When God made His covenant with Moses, He intended that Israel would be a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:6) and His Law be taught by the Levitical Priesthood (Lev 24:8; Deut 27:9-10). Obedience to the Law was to make the nation of Israel holy to God (Ex 22:31; Deut 7:6; 14:2). Even as the nation of Israel made their initial commitment to the Mosaic Covenant, God anticipated their failure when He tells Moses of a future prophet who we later learn is Jesus who does nothing on His own but speaks just what His Father taught Him (John 8:28).

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him. For this is what you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die." The Lord said to me: "What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. (Deut 18:15-18, NIV)

As the supposed kingdom of priests, why didn't the Jews of the first century recognize this prophet Jesus? With many messianic prophecies pointing to Jesus Christ, why didn't the Pharisees recognize the Messiah mediator of the New Covenant? As Gentiles, what can we learn from the first century Jew?

1. As teachers of the Mosaic Law, Pharisees were criticized by Jesus. What do you observe of Jesus' criticism of their study of Scripture that reveals their shortcomings?

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

"I do not accept glory from human beings, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?

"But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?" (John 5:39-47, NIV)

2. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for another shortcoming in their study of Scripture. What do you observe here?

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,' they are not to 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

"These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.'" (Matt 15:1-9, NIV)

Jews: Would've Should've Could've Recognized Jesus Christ Teacher Notes

When God made His covenant with Moses, He intended that Israel would be a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:6) and His Law be taught by the Levitical Priesthood (Lev 24:8; Deut 27:9-10). Obedience to the Law was to make the nation of Israel holy to God (Ex 22:31; Deut 7:6; 14:2). Even as the nation of Israel made their initial commitment to the Mosaic Covenant, God anticipated their failure when He tells Moses of a future prophet who we later learn is Jesus who does nothing on His own but speaks just what His Father taught Him (John 8:28).

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Encourage the student to circle / underline words and phrases to aid in observation.

Jesus notes that the Pharisees study the Scriptures but apparently do not understand the biblical text. Rather than honoring and respecting teachers for their understanding of God's word, the Pharisees preferred those of public prominence.

To help the student understand what Jesus was referring to when commenting on the Pharisees' study of the Scriptures, search online for "Midrash Halakha."

Midrash Halakha describes an ancient process of Jewish Bible study / exposition. These rabbinic interpretations were often regarded as corresponding to the real meaning of the scriptural texts, considered authoritative, and formed the basis of Jewish religious laws. This included the addition of new laws to the Law of Moses.

Jesus is speaking of the Pharisees' devotion to the Midrash, commentaries of the biblical text, rather than God's word itself. A similar error of misunderstanding God's word may exist today when one reads a commentary as a substitute to reading the Bible.

2. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for another shortcoming in their study of Scripture. What do you observe here?

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Ask the student: what does tradition mean? Are there any Christian traditions that are as authoritative as the Bible?
Allow time for discussion and debate.

A tradition is the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation

By calling the Pharisees and teachers of the Law hypocrites (Matt 15:1-9), Jesus draws attention to the authority they live by - their tradition of Jewish religious law rather than by the commandment of God. For example, the Midrash Halakha added laws to the Mosaic Law and required everyone to live by them.

Ask the student: how do you find the Isaiah prophecy that Jesus is referring to?

An easy way is to find a commentary for Matthew 15:1-9 and see what the commentator says what Isaiah passage is cited. Evaluate the Isaiah passage and determine if the citation is correct – often the words are identical or very similar between the two passages. Study the Isaiah passage to understand what Jesus is saying.

Jesus’ quotation of Isaiah 29:13 draws a comparison to the circumstances that prompted Isaiah’s prophetic judgment in his time. Then as now, worship is vain when it is based on the precepts of Pharisees and scribes (i.e. codified erroneous biblical interpretation and religious practice) whose doctrine lacked any basis in God’s word rather than on one’s love for God and His word. Jesus is challenging the theological validity of halakha tradition and its teaching.

Tradition is not equivalent to God’s word nor carries the same authority as the Bible.