



Jesus the Prophet

Lesson 6

Let's imagine you live in first century Judea and are at the grocery store comparing the price of barley loaves and sardines when your friend comes up to you. In an excited voice they ask you, "Did you hear that Jesus is going to be in town?" Somewhat confused, you ask "Jesus, who is that?" What would their answer be? What category would Jews of the first century put Jesus in? What word would best describe him?

Many would respond teacher, or rabbi. And Jesus was thought of as a teacher, but he was different from other teachers. Lots of people taught; what Jesus did went above and beyond teaching. The term that is used by Jesus' contemporaries and by Jesus himself to describe his behavior is the word "prophet." While Jesus was certainly more than just a prophet, he was not less. Yet too often we fail to think of Jesus in terms of a prophet.

What comes into your mind when you think of a prophet? How would you describe a prophet to someone who had never heard that word before?

In this lesson we're going to think a little about prophets. Then we're going to see the hope for a supreme prophet who would come, and finally show how Jesus is this prophet.

I. What is a prophet?

If we are going to say that Jesus is the greatest prophet who ever lived, we need to understand what a prophet is. Most people share a common idea of a prophet: someone who makes predictions of the future because God speaks directly to them. But this popular definition, while not necessarily wrong, is somewhat lacking. There's more to being a prophet.

A. Someone who spoke on God's behalf (Exodus 7:1-2)

Scripture gives us a helpful illustration of what a prophet is and what a prophet does. Moses, terrified by the idea of speaking to Pharaoh, asks God if God would be willing to use someone else. God says no but allows Moses to have a spokesman, his brother Aaron. God then tells Moses that Moses will be like God to Aaron, and Aaron will be like a prophet for Moses. In other words, prophets are, simply put, people who speak on God's behalf.

As we read the prophets and their writers, we find over and over again the phrase “thus saith the Lord” or “declares the Lord.” The prophets were clear that they were not just give their own message, it was God’s message they gave to the people. God often uses them to predict the future and let people know what will happen, but not every message is a prediction.

B. Someone who criticized the sins of his day

So what exactly did they say when they spoke? Normally, the prophets were calling out the society in which they lived. These men and women were pretty revolutionary for their day. To put it in modern terms, they “spoke truth to power.” Prophets would walk into the temple precincts (Jeremiah 7) or the royal court (2 Samuel 12) and warn people of God’s coming judgment, instruct people to turn from their sins and to trust God. Often these warnings were biting and their criticisms of the sins of their day were sharp.

What types of sins did the prophets criticize?

As we think about the types of criticisms they leveled against their contemporaries, these sins generally fall into two general camps:

- **Social sins (Amos 2:6-8; Habakkuk 1:4; Hosea 7:1-3; Micah 2:1-2)**

The prophets were very upset at the injustice that was rampant in Israel and Judah. Public idolatry led to social degradation and resulted in corruption in the courts, the wealthy taking advantage of the poor, and political intrigue and assassination. The prophets went after the abuse of the spiritual leaders of the land, be they false prophets (Jeremiah 28), priests (Hosea 5:1), or kings (Ezekiel 34).

How can we as Americans be warned by these messages?

- **Private sins (Hosea 4:2, 14; Jeremiah 7:17-18)**

The prophets did call out public, national sins of injustice, but they were also concerned about private, individual sins as well. The rampant immorality in the culture and the idolatry happening in the streets of the city was a huge problem that God’s prophets addressed strongly. The lying, adultery, killing, and stealing that was happening among everyone, not just the wealthy and elite, was a big part of the problem that led to God’s judgment.

Typically, Christians tend to focus on one of these aspects – either focusing on the matters of national justice and the strong warnings against those taking advantage of the poor, or they focus on the personal condemnation and deal with individuals for their sins. The prophets do both. They call out national and public sins (for Israel and for her neighbors), and they call out individuals participating in sinful activities within those nations.

C. Someone who applied the warnings of God's Word to the people

By default, we think of the prophets as people who would make specific predictions about what the future would look like. Prophets did often do that, but normally they would simply remind people of the warnings they already knew from Scripture. The prophets would often apply passages like the cursings and blessings from Deuteronomy 27-28 to their contemporaries. God had warned Israel that if they sinned, the punishment would be exile, famine, and disease. Often God's prophets give specific predictions about the future, but these predictions were often a fleshing out of general disasters God had already warned them about.

Can you think of examples in Scripture where a prophet warned the people that God's prophesied judgments were coming if they did not turn away?

- **Elijah** – no rain because of covenant disobedience (1 Kings 17:1; cf Deuteronomy 28:23-24).
- **Jeremiah** – exile for those who rebel against the Lord (Jeremiah 25:11-12, cf Deuteronomy 28:41, 47-51).
- **Haggai** – blight and mildew for those who fail to keep the covenant (Haggai 2:17; cf Deuteronomy 28:22).

D. Someone who performed symbolic signs

Another frequent characteristic of the prophets was the shocking and sometimes bizarre behavior they would engage in to get people's attention. The prophets were sent by God to wake up a people lulled into complacency by their sin. Sometimes that required doing bizarre or unusual things or performing symbolic gestures to make a point. Sometimes these signs were miraculous demonstrations of God's power. In any case, the point was always to reaffirm and to clarify God's message to his people.

Can you think of examples in the Old Testament where prophets performed odd signs or symbolic gestures in order to get people's attention?

- **Hosea** was told to marry a woman of whoredom and take her back after she was unfaithful (Hosea 1:3; 3:1)
- **Ezekiel** was told to remarry after his wife died and to not mourn her passing (Ezekiel 24:15-24)
- **Isaiah** walked around naked as a sign that Egypt and Ethiopia would be carried away captive naked into Assyria (Isaiah 20)
- **Jeremiah** bought a piece of land and made a public showing of going through the process to emphasize the exile would end and the land would be bought and sold again (Jeremiah 32:5-15).

So what is a prophet? To answer that question, we have taken a brief survey of prophets in the Old Testament. A prophet is a spokesman for God, one who called out personal and national sin, who warned about coming judgment, and who performed mighty and often symbolic acts. As we will see, this is a very accurate description of the ministry of Jesus.

II. The coming prophet

The Old Testament set up the expectation, however, that there was a great prophet who was still to come. Israel's history was full of prophets, but by the end there is a great prophet whom they are still waiting for. To understand how this works, we need to go back to the birth of the nation.

A. Moses, the greatest prophet (Deuteronomy 34:10).

Moses isn't the first prophet. That honor, believe it or not, goes to Abraham (Genesis 20:7). However, Moses is the first person who functions in many of the ways we would think of a prophet functioning. He speaks on God's behalf, lays down God's laws for God's people, and then holds them to the commitments they have made. Scripture states that no other prophet that compares to Moses (Deuteronomy 34:10-12). What God did through him in bringing out the Israel from Egypt with mighty signs and by meeting with him face to face is greater than what Elijah, Jeremiah, or Isaiah were ever able to accomplish.

B. Moses, the inferior prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15-18).

Yet despite the impressive stature of Moses, he claimed that there was a prophet coming who would be like him! As was mentioned, none of the other Old Testament prophets quite measured up to the impressive stature of Moses. In fact, during the time of Christ, people were looking for this prophet, for "that prophet that should come into the world" (John 6:14).

III. Jesus, the prophet

Jesus was much more than just a prophet. Prophet's spoke on behalf of God; Jesus spoke as God. Prophets gave pieces and fragments of God, Jesus fully revealed the father.

A. Jesus performed symbolic actions.

When think of Jesus as a prophet, we realize that a lot of his actions looked very much like Moses-Ezekiel-Jeremiah-Hosea-Isaiah type things. His miracles and symbolic gestures often had greater significance, much like the prophets of old. Some of these passages can be a little odd if you forget that what Jesus is doing he is doing to make a theological point, and so we will take a few minutes to look at some of these.

- **His miracles (John 14:10-11)**

We are told that Jesus looked at the crowds and had compassion on them (Matthew 14:14), but that was not the only or even the primary reason why he healed. Jesus' miracles were, as the gospel of John frequently calls them, signs. They pointed to his work as the Son of God and validated his ministry before all.

In what ways do the various miracles of Jesus prove different things about his ministry? (i.e. the raising of Lazarus, stilling the sea, casting out demons, etc.)

- **Cleansing the temple (Matthew 21:12-13)**

When Jesus went into the temple and overthrew tables and drove out those selling sacrifices and kept people out who were carrying stuff, he did so to make a point. It was a symbolic act showing God's disdain for the current temple system and the leadership it was under and perhaps even to suggest God's coming judgment. How Christ thought about what was going on in the temple was hinted at in the short sentence he uttered "My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves" (Matthew 21:13).

Jesus is alluding to a famous sermon by Jeremiah in the second half of that sentence. In Jeremiah 7:11 the prophet there warns that God will bring judgment on Judah, despite their confidence that God would never let the city fall because they have the temple. Jeremiah accuses them of using the temple as a "hideout," a den for robbers to hide in, thinking they can go out and commit crimes and then come back and hunker down safely in the temple and be protected from God's judgment. Jeremiah warns them that God has brought judgment on his previous sanctuary at Shiloh, and he will bring judgment on Jerusalem as well.

Jesus seems to be picking up the thread and warning that God will bring judgment on Jerusalem once again. Jesus has called out the sins of the leadership for years now, and they have rejected his message. In fact, their Messiah has come and they are even now seeking to kill him. Jesus symbolically overthrows the means of commerce in the temple, trying once again to wake up a complacent people so that they realize how seriously they have offended a holy God, and warning that God will destroy this temple if they don't turn from their ways (cf Matthew 24:1-2; Luke 19:41-44).

- **Cursing the fig tree (Mark 11:12-14; 20-21)**

This curious incident is put right next to the cleansing of the temple which comes between the first and second episode in this two-part story. The fig tree was an Old Testament picture of Israel (Hosea 9:10; Jeremiah 24). This fig tree looked promising, but upon closer inspection it was lacking actual fruit. Likewise Israel looked good

religiously, but upon closer inspection Christ found that they were lacking true spiritual fruit.

B. Jesus decried the social and private sins of people.

Jesus called out the sins of his day, both individual sins and the larger sins of the nation and the leadership of the nation. In Matthew 5-7, Jesus sets forth his standard of righteousness of individuals. He internalizes the law, concerned not just with what people **do**, but with what they think and want, indeed with what they **are**. He also calls out the spiritual leaders of his day in Matthew 23, showing them to be outwardly very impressive but inwardly full of problems.

In what other ways did Jesus address the sins of people/the nation? How was Jesus' method different from that of the Pharisees?

C. Jesus warned of coming judgment.

Like the prophets of old, Jesus warned of coming judgment. We often think of Jesus' ministry as one being characterized by grace and mercy, and it was. However, this does not mean that Jesus never warned about coming judgment. In fact, it was a recurring theme of his ministry.

Can you think of instances where Jesus warned about coming judgment?

Examples of judgment warnings

- John 3:16-19
- Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 10:12-15
- Matthew 25:31-46
- Matthew 12:38-42; Luke 11:29-32
- Luke 6:24-26

How does this fit with Jesus' mission of salvation and hope for sinners?

D. Jesus perfectly communicated God's Word (Hebrews 1:1-3; John 14:8-9).

Finally, we see that Jesus perfectly communicated the truth of God. In this way, Jesus is greater than just a prophet. Jesus said it best when he said to Philip, "he that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). The clearest revelation of God's plan and person is found in Jesus, because Jesus not only speaks on behalf of God, he speaks as God.

The prophets worked as spokesmen for God, warning that God's judgment was coming and calling Israel to turn from their sin and turn back to God. Jesus ministry began with the standard prophetic call "Repent!"¹ (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:10). Jesus was the prophet that Israel was waiting for, but he was also so much more than that. Christ came and spoke to us on God's behalf, calling us to repent of our sin, giving us hope for the future of those who are faithful to God, and performing powerful signs that grab our attention, vindicate his ministry, and clarify his teaching. Jesus came with a message from God, a message about the coming kingdom of God. It is to the theme of the kingdom, and the King of the kingdom, that we will turn next week.

¹ The normal Old Testament language is "turn," a word which carries much of the same idea as the New Testament concept of "repentance." Repentance is more than just confession of sin, although that ought to be a part of it. At its heart, repentance is a turning from my sin to God.