

Who Is The Antichrist? And Why Should I Care?

1. Warm-up question: Sunday's sermon began with several riddles. Have you heard any good riddles lately? If not, have someone look up one or two on their phone and see if the group can guess the answer.
2. On Sunday we studied the Antichrist, who is sometimes also referred to as "the beast." Revelation 13:18 says, "Let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six." Fascinating. It's like God is telling us a riddle – a coded message to watch out for someone or something whose number is 6-6-6." Ever since, people have been poring over the clues trying to figure out what God meant. Let's begin by reading the passage that offers this and other key clues – Revelation 13:1-18, as printed on p. 3.
3. On Sunday Jeff shared three different popular interpretations of the Antichrist. The first interpretation sees the first beast John's vision as the Roman Empire, especially during the reign of Emperor Nero, whose vicious persecution of Christians lasted 42 months. The second beast in John's vision is the pagan religious system that encouraged emperor worship. The blow to the head of the first beast was Nero's death, which was followed by the rapid succession of three different emperors within 12 months. Thereafter empire stabilized and carried forward in the form of the second beast. In defense of this interpretation, adherents point out that each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has an associated number. Nero's name and title (Caesar Nero) spelled in Hebrew (which uses no vowels) is Q-s-r N-r-w-n. The associated numbers 100-60-200 50-200-6-50 equal 666.
 - a. What do you make of this interpretation? Does this feel credible to you?
 - b. This first interpretation is surprising in two ways. First, it posits that the Antichrist is a government system not limited to an individual person. Second, it posits that Antichrist has already come and gone. How does that sit with you?
4. A second interpretation agrees that the first beast is the Roman Empire, but sees the second beast differently. In this view, the deadly wound to the head of first beast represents the demise of the Roman Empire, which then comes back to life in the form of a second beast, i.e., the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. Adherents to this view remind us that the Roman Church executed far more nonconforming Christians during the Middle Ages than the Roman Empire ever did. Adherents to this view also point out that each letter of the Greek alphabet also had a number associated with it. The numbers associated with the Greek word for L-a-t-i-n total 666. In this view, John was using a coded language to warn early believers that they would be persecuted for hundreds of years by two different Latin institutions.
 - a. The idea that institutional church itself – both Catholic and Protestant – can become a form of "anti-Christ" is pretty bracing. How do you feel about this second interpretation? Does it feel credible? Why or why not?

- b. Has there ever been a time in your life when institutional church became an “anti-Christ” force pushing you away from faith? Tell us what happened.
5. The third interpretation gets the most press in our era. In this third view, the Antichrist has not yet appeared, but when he does, he will be a charismatic political leader who unites a coalition of European nations as a kind of revived Roman Empire, forming a modern one-world government that severely persecutes Christians. In defense of this interpretation, adherents point out that if you list out each Roman numeral and add them up – I, V, X, L, C, D – you get 666.
 - a. Some of us grew up fearing this third scenario. If you grew up in a church that taught this third interpretation, how did that affect you? Was it positive or negative for you – or some of both?
 - b. What do you think of Jeff’s idea that maybe all three interpretations are correct?
6. To make things even more complicated, the book of First John warns us not just to beware of THE Antichrist (discussed above), but also to beware of many other little antichrists that will come along. Read I John 2:18-27, as printed on pp. 3-4.
7. In this passage of scripture, John warns that the world is full of deceivers, including false teachers who will seek to distort and twist the message of Jesus. In John’s time it was Gnostic teachers; in ours the deception may take other forms. Implicit in what John says is a three-part formula for avoiding spiritual deception: (a) Don’t be unduly deferential to religious leaders; dare to ask the hard questions; (b) Listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit inside you; and (c) Test everything for consistency with what Jesus said and did in the Gospels. Never embrace a teaching that would in any way “dissolve” or diminish Jesus (I John 4:3).
 - a. Have you ever been under the influence of a church or religious leader that you feel distorted the message of Jesus? What happened? Did you ask the hard questions? Why is it so hard to question religious leaders and institutions?
 - b. Do you have confidence that you can hear the voice of the Holy Spirit within you? Tell us about a time recently when that voice guided you in the right direction – either on a practical issue or a matter of theological truth.
 - c. Jesus is our gold standard for truth – not what somebody else told you about Jesus, but what you yourself have directly read about Jesus in the Bible. What’s something you see in Jesus in the Bible that is often missed or distorted by many religious leaders in our time?
 - d. At this point on your spiritual journey, do you feel you have the confidence to “own” your faith – or do you feel you’re still overly dependent on what others tell you? How can we better take ownership of our faith?

Revelation 13:1-18

¹And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. ²And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority. ³One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. ⁴They worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'

⁵ The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷Also, it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, ⁸and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

¹¹ Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. ¹²It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. ¹³It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; ¹⁴and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived; ¹⁵and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. ¹⁶Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. ¹⁸This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred and sixty-six.

I John 2:18-27

¹⁸ Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. ²⁰But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. ²¹I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth. ²²Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. ²³No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also. ²⁴Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then

you will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.

²⁶ I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. ²⁷As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.