

An Evil and Adulterous Generation

Matthew 12:38-42

People often make mention of Gideon when they are looking for a sign to try to test God's will. We read about Gideon's fleece in,

Judges 6:36 "So Gideon said to God, "If You will save Israel by my hand as You have said— 37 look, I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said." 38 And it was so. When he rose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece together, he wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water."

Amazingly, however, that wasn't enough for Gideon.

Judges 6:39 "Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more: Let me test, I pray, just once more with the fleece; let it now be dry only on the fleece, but on all the ground let there be dew." 40 And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground."

Because of that account, many people conclude that "putting out your fleece" is a good and acceptable way to gain God's wisdom and will. Ask for a sign. Even, as it would seem with Gideon's example, put the Lord to the test. Many would view that as a sign of strength and maturity. However, with Gideon in mind, I view that as a sign of weakness and unbelief. In Gideon's case, God was mercifully patient, and granted the request, but how much strength and wisdom is there when you get a direct answer from God, and then ask him the same question again? And, indeed, even before the fleece was put out the first time, Gideon had received a revelation of God's will. God had already given him signs to confirm the validity of the revelation.

For example,

Judges 6:12 And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him, and said to him, "The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!" ... 16 And the LORD said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man."

So God had already promised victory! And still Gideon asked for a sign. The amazing part of the story is that Lord, in his grace, provided that sign. In our text this afternoon, however, Jesus doesn't respond in that same way to another request for a sign, because here he is dealing with the Pharisees, those self-righteous hypocrites who wished only to make themselves look good. And Jesus had for them a word of condemnation, calling them an evil and adulterous generation.

Why is that? That's our focus this afternoon. Why such harsh words to their request of verse 38, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." Based on Jesus' answer, we can freely say that,

I. THE DEMAND FOR A SIGN FROM JESUS IS EVIL. v.39

But again, why? What's so wrong with this request? To answer that question very simply, because Jesus had already given so many signs! Just go back over the chapters we have studied. Miracles, healings, casting out demons, calming storms, even raising someone from the dead. All of those signs should have been sufficient to stimulate the response of faith, but in the sinful hearts of the learned scribes and the proud Pharisees, there was only cold-hearted unbelief. And another demand. So Jesus' answer was, "no," and then some. For good reason.

A. Signs (miracles) have been abundant.

So the additional demand, rooted in unbelief, is evil. Because

it is rooted in unbelief! That's the point. They refused to believe what Jesus had already said and done. They rejected the display of his power. They put him to the test, in violation of the very law of Moses those Pharisees so self-righteously claimed for themselves.

Deut. 6:13 "You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name. 14 You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are all around you 15 (for the LORD your God is a jealous God among you), lest the anger of the LORD your God be aroused against you and destroy you from the face of the earth. 16 "You shall not tempt the LORD your God as you tempted Him in Massah."

So it is evil, to test the Lord by asking for a sign when signs have already been given! It is adulterous, as I just read, "the LORD your God is a jealous God among you." Jealous for you to believe him. Jealous for you to trust him. And testing him, in the unbelieving rejection of his own word and works, is nothing less than serving another god.

There is one God, one true God, and he alone is worthy of your trust. That's what is so wrong with further testing, in the presence of such abundant evidences of his power and glory. Let me give you an illustration of this from the Bible, the Rich Man and Lazarus, Luke 16. After asking for Lazarus to come and give him some relief from the torment of the fires of hell, and being denied, the Rich Man asked this:

Luke 16:27 "Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, 28 for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' 29 Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' 30 And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the

prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.' "

They already have the word of God. They already have Moses and the Prophets, and they would not believe. "...neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead." And, of course, that evaluation would prove true, as someone did rise from the dead and they still did not believe!

Enough signs were already given. Enough revelation was already provided. And all of those...

B. Signs call for a response of faith.

But no faith was forthcoming. That is why Jesus gives them such a harsh response and such a critical judgment. "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." That sign, of course, had already been given, and that's the point. Jesus was calling them to faith, calling them to believe. Just as he did in the home of friends Mary and Martha, when their brother Lazarus had died.

John 11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

That's the direct application of all of Jesus' signs and miracles. That is the direct application as I preach the Bible to you. "Do you believe this?"

In that case, Martha did believe.

John 11:27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

But here in our text today, there was no such faith. Only

wicked and evil unbelief. Let's look then at the two signs Jesus identifies.

II. JONAH AS A SIGN OF JESUS.

v.40

As with all illustrations, you can't push every detail as carrying some separate point of significance, along the lines of modern day allegory. You can't press every detail of the illustration to reveal some specific and intentional revelation. Instead, generally speaking, there is one main point to be made, and the sign of Jonah is an obvious point, the resurrection of the dead. From our human perspective, Jonah was dead. For three days. Dead, and then brought back to life. That's a sign of Jesus, "so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Jesus would endure the suffering and humiliation of death. His human, body, separated from his human soul, would descend to the grave and remain under the power of death. Until the resurrection!

A. Jonah shows us Jesus.

Further, Jonah came to know the power of God unto salvation in the belly of the great fish. His final words during that experience, as recorded in Jonah 2, are these: "But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord."

And then, when "the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land," he went and preached again to Nineveh, and they repented of their sin and believed in God. They were forgiven their sin and escaped the judgment which God had threatened.

B. Jonah's preaching brings repentance.

As the signs and miracles ought always to do! That's the point. Similarly, the Queen of the South, often identified as the Queen of Sheba.

v.42

III. THE QUEEN OF THE SOUTH AS A SIGN OF JESUS.

Let's look at that reference as well.

1 Kings 10:1 "Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the LORD, she came to test him with hard questions. 2 She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels that bore spices, very much gold, and precious stones; and when she came to Solomon, she spoke with him about all that was in her heart. 3 So Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing so difficult for the king that he could not explain it to her. 4 And when the queen of Sheba had seen all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, 5 the food on his table, the seating of his servants, the service of his waiters and their apparel, his cupbearers, and his entryway by which he went up to the house of the LORD, there was no more spirit in her. 6 Then she said to the king: "It was a true report which I heard in my own land about your words and your wisdom. 7 However I did not believe the words until I came and saw with my own eyes; and indeed the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity exceed the fame of which I heard. 8 Happy are your men and happy are these your servants, who stand continually before you and hear your wisdom! 9 Blessed be the LORD your God, who delighted in you, setting you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD has loved Israel forever, therefore He made you king, to do justice and righteousness." 10 Then she gave the king one hundred and twenty talents of gold, spices in great quantity, and precious stones. There never again came such abundance of spices as the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.

Here, actually, the emphasis falls upon King Solomon, and what the Queen of Sheba would come to know and believe is the wisdom which God had given to Solomon. She came to believe that,

A. The wisdom of God is revealed through Solomon.

She did, indeed, attribute it all to God. As I just read, verse 8, she declared to Solomon, “Happy are your men! Happy are these your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the Lord loved Israel forever, he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness.”

She saw the evidence of God’s wisdom. She believed the revelation of God’s wisdom. As Jesus interprets it,

v.42b “...she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon...”

She received the sign from God, and believed. She received the wisdom of God, and believed. She came to confirm what she had been told, and she believed. Jesus takes that one step farther, one step deeper.

v.42b “...and indeed a greater than Solomon is here.”

So,

B. Solomon shows us Jesus.

What a marvelous sign! What an insightful understanding and application of the Old Testament. Solomon makes it obvious that someone greater than Solomon is coming! Solomon makes it clear that the wisdom of God would come to be revealed in the flesh. The wisdom of Solomon would be incarnate as a man, and live and dwell among us as Jesus.

Just one example of that sign in the Old Testament, from the

wisdom of Solomon in,

Prov. 3:13 “Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, 14 for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. 15 She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. 16 Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. 17 Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. 18 She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed. 19 The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; 20 by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew.”

A tree of life! Such wisdom is Jesus. And even more clearly, again as Solomon writes, “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; 20 by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew.” That’s Jesus!

The sign was already given. So Jesus’ answer here in our text today is really the same as Abraham’s response to the Rich Man I read just a moment ago, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” Only an evil and adulterous generation would seek more signs, when so many have already been given. Let them hear, let them believe, for Jesus has already been made known through Moses and the Prophets, through the whole of the Old Testament.

All for one purpose, that you might believe. Jesus’ own life and work is summarized near the end of John’s gospel with these words,

John 20:30 “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the

Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

So I proclaim Jesus to you, today; week after week. I proclaim Jesus’ work and his words, for one purpose. With only one goal in mind, “that you may believe.” And, therefore, “that by believing you may have life in his name.” We don’t need additional signs. We don’t need additional revelation. It’s all here. The Bible is sufficient. Everything you need in order to believe is here in this Word.

But not everyone believes.

John 10:25 “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one.”

Thus, in our text today, we see so plainly that,

IV. JUDGMENT WILL COME TO THOSE WHO REJECT THE REVELATION OF GOD.

The sign which would bring salvation to those who believe will bring judgment to those who don’t. That’s the sign of Jonah and the sign of the Queen of Sheba.

And actually, what is made even more explicit, is that,

A. Those who believe will take part in God’s judgment.

The ultimate irony, especially for the scribes and Pharisees. The people of Nineveh will be their judge!

v.41

They repented. They believed. They will judge those don’t! The heathen citizens of Nineveh who repented at the preaching of Jonah will, at the end of the age, take part in the judgment of those in Israel who remain dead in their unbelief.

The apostle Paul has a fascinating word of encouragement for the church at Rome, which I’ll use shortly as the benediction for our worship service this evening. It speaks of this judgment which is soon to come.

Rom. 16:20 “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”

That’s the promise of the covenant of grace, isn’t it? That God would crush Satan under the foot of Jesus. But we who believe will be joined with Jesus in the exercise of that judgment! God has already “raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,” according to Ephesians 2:6. And when Paul writes to the Thessalonians about Jesus’ return in judgment at the end of the age, he specifies that time with these words, “at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” With all his saints! We will be with Jesus in the judgment, we who believe. Along with the believers from Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba. For when they heard of about Jesus, they believed!

The rest will be judged, and judged righteously. For,

B. Evil and adulterous unbelief is the ground for God’s judgment.

So we come full circle with this text. The judgment of Jesus is pronounced against those who do not believe, those whom he identifies as an evil and adulterous generation. And he judges them for their evil, the evil of unbelief. He judges them for their adultery, the unfaithfulness of serving other gods. And his judgment is just!

So, no more signs. After all, what more could possibly ask for than Jesus' resurrection. And that is the gospel I preach to you, every Lord's day, and especially so on this day in which we make such particular emphasis upon the resurrection of Jesus.

1 Cor. 15:3 "...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."

I preach to you the gospel of Jesus Christ "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." And I declare to you that this revelation of Jesus which we have received is sufficient. With this encouragement, that "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."