

The Sign 11-28-04

Matthew 12:38-50 (NIV)

³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." ³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. ⁴² The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. ⁴³ "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. ⁴⁴ Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. ⁴⁵ Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation." ⁴⁶ While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." ⁴⁸ He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

I trust you had a blessed Thanksgiving! God is good! We have so much to be thankful for. Most of all we have our self-giving servant Father who loved us enough to send His only Son to die in our place. In our passage for today, the religious leaders continue their attacks.

³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you."

Why were the people that had been plotting to murder Jesus suddenly interested in a sign? Actually, they were always looking for signs. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom..." 1 Corinthians 1:22 (NIV) They were probably looking for something similar to that which God gave to Moses. When Moses was sent to his people to free them, he was given several signs. His rod would turn to a snake. His hand would become leprous and then whole again. (Exodus 4:1-8) But this was to convince their hard hearts. They had already been told that they would be strangers in Egypt for 400 years. (Genesis 15:13) They should have been expecting a deliverer.

As students of God's word, the Pharisees also should have known the prophecy that declared that God would give them a sign. A virgin would conceive and bear a son. (Isaiah 7:14) God told them that the word of God bound to their doorpost and bodies would be their sign. (Deuteronomy 11:18) In other words, they should always carefully observe the Word and its predictions. If they had truly done this, they would have seen the detailed predictions that came to pass in the life of Christ.

Commented [notes1]: ¹ And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee. ² And the LORD said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod. ³ And he said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. ⁴ And the LORD said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand: ⁵ That they may believe that the LORD God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee. ⁶ And the LORD said furthermore unto him, Put now thine hand into thy bosom. And he put his hand into his bosom: and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous as snow. ⁷ And he said, Put thine hand into thy bosom again. And he put his hand into his bosom again; and plucked it out of his bosom, and, behold, it was turned again as his other flesh. ⁸ And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe thee, neither hearken to the voice of the first sign, that they will believe the voice of the latter sign.
Exodus 4:1-8 (KJV)

Commented [notes2]: ¹³ And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; Genesis 15:13 (KJV)

Commented [notes3]: ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14 (KJV)

Commented [notes4]: ¹⁸ Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes. Deuteronomy 11:18 (KJV)

God wants His people to believe by faith. Wicked Herod wanted to see a miracle. (Luke 23:8) It thrills us to see the miraculous, but it does not necessarily change us. God wants His people to take Him at His word. He does not want them to believe because of signs, because there can be false signs. In fact, He warned them that there would be false signs. (Deuteronomy 13:1-3)

Commented [notes5]: ⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. Luke 23:8 (NIV)

³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. How many times have you asked God for a sign? "Lord, I'll do it if you'll just give me a sign." God wants you to obey because He revealed His will in His word. He wants you to act in faith at the prompting of His Spirit. It is impossible to please God without faith. (Hebrews 11:6) We love signs because they make it easy for us. They do not require such an intimate relationship with God. If God used our fax machines to communicate with us, we could just go our merry way until the next fax came. We obey that and then we go back to doing our own thing. A personal relationship with Jesus requires a sensitive heart. God is not after wrote obedience to printed messages from your fax machine or even from the Bible. He is looking for a heart that has surrendered to Him and is constantly walking and talking with Him. He wants a relationship of faith that directs us moment by moment through the Word. Try communicating with your spouse through signs.

Commented [notes6]: ¹ If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, ² And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; ³ Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Deuteronomy 13:1-3 (KJV)

Commented [notes7]: ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Hebrews 11:6 (NIV)

One term Jesus used here illustrates what He is getting at, "adulterous". The prophet Hosea was told to find a harlot for a wife to illustrate how unfaithful Israel had been. He claimed the nation was guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord. (Hosea 1:2) Though they outwardly did what they were supposed to do, their hearts had gone after the world. James tells us that when we cozy up to the world system, the world's enticements, we have become adulterers toward God. (James 4:4) When we begin to love what the world offers, we are being wooed by the Prince of this world who is the enemy of God. No wonder God calls it adultery. It is turning away from the love He has to offer because we have chosen to love something opposed to Him. He describes it in way that our hearts can relate to it.

Commented [notes8]: ² When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD." Hosea 1:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: ⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. James 4:4 (NIV)

How was their request for a sign an indication of that kind of heart? They did not want to heed the word of God or live in a personal relationship with God. Instead, they preferred to have signs given to them. A sign may be necessary when you do not have a clear answer in Scripture, but they did have clear answers. Jesus had already given them the passages that proved He is the Messiah. Even if He gave them a sign, they would only harden their hearts further making themselves even more culpable. (Consider Zechariah's sign in Luke 1:18)

Jesus promised they would get one irrefutable sign that they would have to accept or reject the sign of Jonah.

⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Jesus would be buried and in the grave three days and yet would rise in victory over death. It is an irrefutable sign. The tomb was guarded. The body was never found. His enemies bribed the soldiers to say the body was stolen. They did not refute the fact that the body was gone. Up to 500 people at one time saw the risen Christ Jesus. The

men who were asking for a sign got the sign. They heard it from an impartial third party, the guards, and they still refused to believe. In the end, every man either chooses to believe or refuses to believe that Jesus is God's provision for sin. We have the sign of Jonah as recorded history, but the Holy Spirit works in each of our hearts as well. No one goes to hell because they did not have enough evidence. There is no greater sign possible, and yet they refused to believe.

⁴¹ "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here."

Jonah arrived on the shores closest to Nineveh. He had a one-sentence message. "In forty days, Nineveh will be destroyed." Can you imagine some smelly man walking through Sedona yelling, "In forty days Sedona will be destroyed!?" The cruel people of Nineveh responded with sackcloth, sat in ashes and wept. They responded to God's work on their heart and that simple message. If they responded to that, imagine the responsibility these men would have after seeing Jesus' miracles, hearing His words, and knowing He rose up from the dead. One greater than Jonah was among them.

Jesus had another word of condemnation for them.

⁴² *The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.*

The Queen of the South had heard accounts of the great wisdom of Solomon. She made that 1200-mile journey over the Sahara desert with many gifts because her heart desired to know wisdom. (1 Kings 10:1-3) If she would travel that great distance just because she heard reports of his wisdom, what should be expected of the religious leaders who sat within the hearing of the One who Himself is Wisdom? (Proverbs 3:19)

Jesus is not done with His warnings. He has told them that Gentiles repented at a simple message, that the Queen of the South would travel a great distance to hear wisdom, but though One greater than Jonah and Solomon was in their midst, they were insisting on a sign. If it took so little to convince Gentiles, why did God's own people need more? Why do you or I need more? If we, too, refuse to believe, they will stand in judgment against us. Why should we demand more proof than has already been given? (Acts 17:30-31)

Next, Jesus predicted their fate that was sealed by the hardness of their hearts.

⁴³ "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. ⁴⁴ Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. ⁴⁵ Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."

I want you to notice that Jesus concludes that picture by saying it is an analogy to the wicked generation that surrounded Him. They had harder hearts than the cruel Gentile Ninevites. They refused the wisdom with which He spoke. They are like a man who is delivered from a demon. If something good does not fill that empty heart, the demon will return with his cohorts and the man will be even worse off. A man might through sheer will power, rid himself of immoral habits and vices, but if something does not

Commented [notes10]: ¹ When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relation to the name of the LORD, she came to test him with hard questions. ² Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan--with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones--she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. ³ Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her.
1 Kings 10:1-3 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: ¹⁹ The LORD by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens.
Proverbs 3:19 (KJV)

Commented [notes12]: ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."
Acts 17:30-31 (NIV)

transform his heart and fill the void, he will likely end up worse than before. Morality without a changed heart is inoculation against repentance.

The Pharisees were inoculated against the truth Jesus taught by their high moral standards. There is a big cry in our culture today to get back to the standards of morality that we had in the past. We see our culture rapidly decaying as it abandons its sense of Christian morality. Morality without a change of heart only causes people to be hardened against the truth. The Pharisees were extremely moral. Their morality convinced them that they were righteous. They were righteous, self-righteous. That is why they could not hear Jesus. (John 8:42-43) He was teaching them that to think you are good when you are evil is the worst kind of deception. The "sinners" and tax collectors at least knew they had a need. The self-righteous Pharisees insisted that they had no need of repentance. Their house was swept clean. However, the spirit of self-righteousness is going to bring back spirits like jealousy and murder. They will all be at home in a self-righteous religious leader.

Commented [notes13]: ⁴² Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. ⁴³ Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. John 8:42-43 (NIV)

If Israel had experienced Jesus' deliverance of their sons and daughters from demons, healing their sick, correcting their misguided theology, and yet they would not receive Him as Lord, they were destined to end off worse than if He had not come. That is, of course, only applicable to those who reject Him and refuse to let Him fill their heart with His life.

Sometimes people attend church, clean up their act, and make new friends. They even forsake some of the things that drove their life in the past. They are all cleaned up. Nevertheless, if they do not repent and fill their heart with Jesus, if His love is not allowed to transform their hearts and fill them with His love, they will often end up worse off than if they had never heard. Certainly, we become more accountable.

⁴⁶ *While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."*

There is a list of Jesus' brothers in the next chapter, and I will comment more on them when we get to that passage. We do know that after the rejection of Jesus in His hometown of Nazareth, Jesus' family seems to have distanced themselves from Him. Imagine your whole community rejecting someone in your family. To keep peace with that close-knit community, you would have either to forsake the exiled family member or move. His brothers did not believe in Him right up to the cross. (John 7:5) At one time, they even got together to try and put Jesus away because they thought He was out of His mind. (Mark 3:21) They had come to see Him for some reason and could not get through the crowd. Perhaps it was a matter of family business, or maybe they saw the collision course with the religious system that Jesus was on and were trying to save Him. Whatever the case, Jesus heard they were waiting to speak with Him.

Commented [notes14]: ⁵ For even his own brothers did not believe in him. John 7:5 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: ²¹ When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." Mark 3:21 (NIV)

His answer tells us so much about Jesus' perception of eternal values.

⁴⁸ *He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."*

Please understand that Jesus is not telling us that our family should not be important to us.

One of Jesus' last expressions was caring for His mother. (John 19:26-27) I believe He cared for His family after Joseph died until He was 30 years of age. We have already seen in Matthew 10 that family has to come second to the will of God in our lives. Our love for God must have first place or our family becomes our god. (Matthew 10:36-37)

Commented [notes16]: ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," ²⁷ and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. John 19:26-27 (NIV)

Jesus asked them a question we could ask ourselves. "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" Most of us would answer that by pointing to flesh and blood. Jesus knew the eternal was more real, more lasting, and more essential. He pointed to His disciples, the ones that followed Him. Jesus' criterion for the closest of relationships was doing the will of His Father in heaven. Why was that? We are closest to those who share our heart. Have you noticed how people who have the same passion are drawn together? Golfers hang out with golfers and talk about ... you guessed it, golf. Hunters hang out with hunters and talk about hunting. People of like religious persuasion become friends. However, this is even deeper than that.

Commented [notes17]: ³⁶ a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' ³⁷ "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; Matthew 10:36-37 (NIV)

A person who does the will of the Father has come to the realization that life in his or her own hands is meaningless or even destructive. They have come to trust their Father in heaven more than they trust themselves. To come to that place, they must have had a revelation of their sin and of the love and grace of God. The will of the Father is to believe on the Son, Jesus taught. (John 6:29) Therefore, we end where we started. Jesus is after a relationship of a shared heart, not of flesh, not of master and slave (Hosea 2:16) nor of signs.

Commented [notes18]: ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." John 6:29 (NIV)

Think how this compares with the monarchs of this world. They want only the closest of kin to take the throne after them. Family is everything and everything goes to family. Jesus feels the same way; He just interprets family in a different way. The world says it is about reproducing your DNA. Jesus says it is all about blood, yes, His blood. If our sins are washed away by the blood of the Lamb, we are family. We are heirs. We even share the same desires and goals. We become more of a family than our flesh and blood family. If that is not the case in your life, you need to examine what is first in your life. Eventually, Jesus' family did become a part of the spiritual family. (Acts 1:14)

Commented [notes19]: ¹⁶ "In that day," declares the LORD, "you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master.'" Hosea 2:16 (NIV)

Everywhere I have traveled, from India to Japan, Korea or England; there have always been people with whom I instantly connected. In a few minutes, it was as if we had known each other all our lives. It is because we are family. We have the same Father. We share the same desires. We eat the same food (the Bible). We may differ on minor issues, but on all the major ones our hearts are in one accord. Jesus promised the disciples that if they gave up family to follow Him, they would have 100 times the family. (Matthew 19:29)

Commented [notes20]: ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. Acts 1:14 (NIV)

Are you in the family of God? Do you consider your family to be those who know Jesus as Lord in their lives? And if not, if this has not been your experience, perhaps this is a call from the Holy Spirit to do some reprioritizing. Jesus' life challenges us repeatedly to see the world and our own lives in the light of eternity. Take the time to do that, for your sake, for the Kingdom's sake, for the sake of the One who loves you and gave Himself for you. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

Commented [notes21]: ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. Matthew 19:29 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: ¹ Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Ephesians 5:1-2 (NIV)